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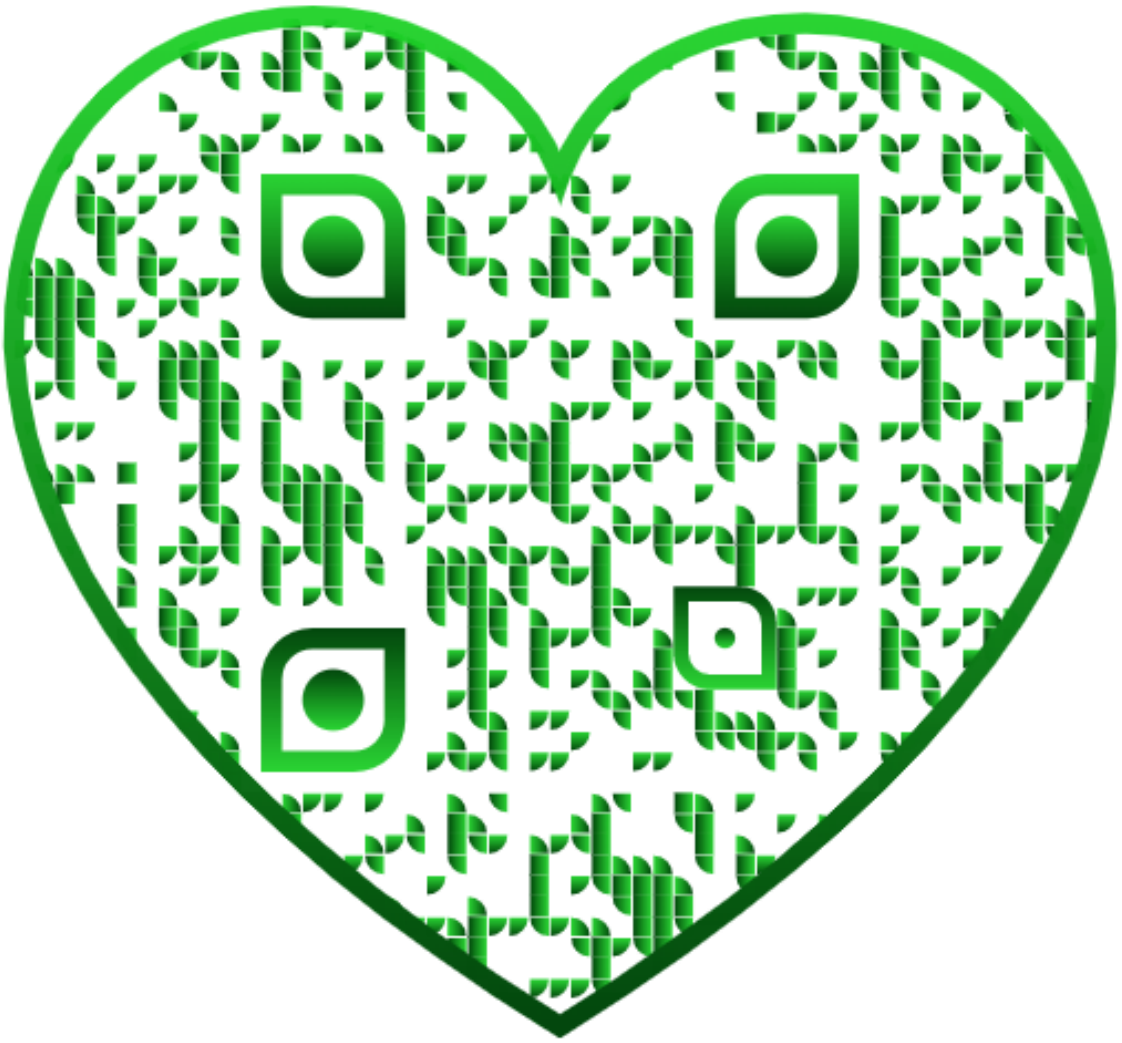

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Contents

ISSUE 345

the absolute sound
THE JOURNAL OF HIGH-END AUDIO

The Absolute Sound's

Product of the Year Awards

p.53

This is the big one! We name the most outstanding products of 2023 in these, our most prestigious awards.

Contents

ISSUE 345

the absolute sound
THE JOURNAL OF HIGH-END AUDIO

p.116

Tidal Contros Digital Control Center and Intra Power Amplifier

Andrew Quint discovers a new level of sonic transparency in this multi-function DAC and preamplifier from Germany's Tidal. Plus: Andrew evaluates the company's first Class D power amplifier, the Intra.

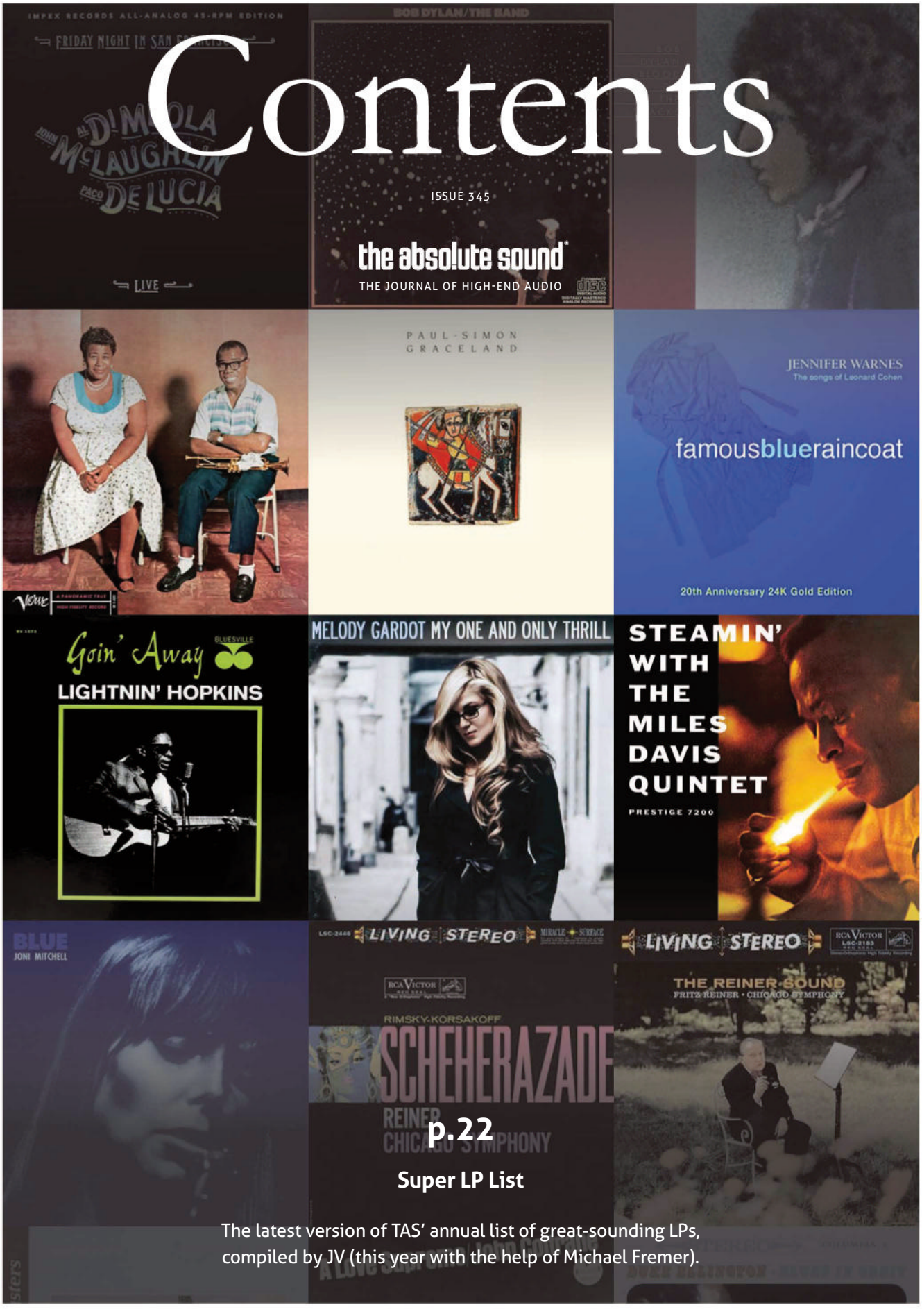
MAGICO

Contents

ISSUE 345

the absolute sound

THE JOURNAL OF HIGH-END AUDIO



p.22

Super LP List

The latest version of TAS' annual list of great-sounding LPs, compiled by JV (this year with the help of Michael Fremer).

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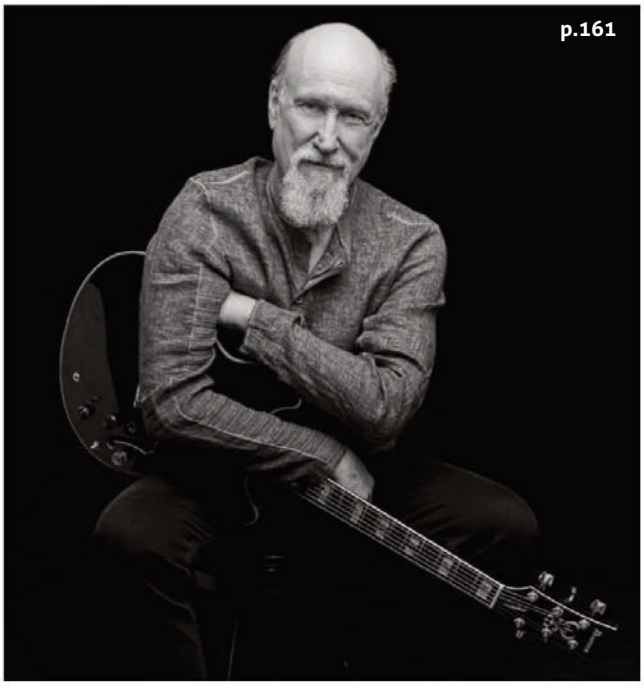
Contents

ISSUE 345

the absolute sound
THE JOURNAL OF HIGH-END AUDIO



161
2023 Top Ten Lists
Top ten lists of 2023's best rock, roots, independent, jazz, and classical recordings.

168
Antal Doráti: The Mercury Masters
The complete Mercury recordings of Antal Doráti conducting the Minneapolis Symphony Orchestra have been remastered for CD, and Arthur Lintgen is impressed.

170
When Miles Went Electric
Seven albums Miles Davis released between 1969 and 1974 were recently remastered for vinyl. Jeff Wilson reports.

175
Rock, Etc.
The Replacements, Be Your Own Pet, Betty Davis, The Doors, Morphine, The Rolling Stones, Madlib, Run-D.M.C., Black Sabbath, Christone "Kingfish" Ingram, and Brian Setzer.

182
Jazz
Matthew Shipp, Leroy Vinnegar, Les McCann, Joe Alterman, Jaco Pastorius, Thad Jones, Buddy Rich, Joy, and Ron Blake.

188
Classical
Grigory Frid, Zubin Mehta, Igor Levit, Heinz Holliger, and four works for cello and piano by American composers.

the absolute sound

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Contents

ISSUE 345

the absolute sound
THE JOURNAL OF HIGH-END AUDIO

Absolute Analog

p.98

98
MoFi MasterPhono Phonostage
Who says a top-flight phonostage has to cost four figures? Michael Fremer weighs in on this outstanding high-value phono preamplifier from designer Peter Madnick and the folks at MoFi.

p.106

106
Benz Micro Ruby Z Moving-Coil Cartridge
Cartridges from the venerable Swiss company Benz Micro are known for their warm musicality, a tradition continued by this new mid-priced moving coil, says Wayne Garcia.

Equipment Reports

110
Dynaudio Confidence 20 Loudspeaker
This little gem of a stand-mount delivers outsized performance, says Neil Gader.

p.110

142
Soulution 727
Standard-setting Swiss electronics manufacturer Soulution has come up with a new landmark preamp, which, among many other improvements, now boasts a bandwidth of 20MHz! To give you perspective on all that has changed, JV reviews the previous offerings in Soulution's topmost Series 7 line, then goes into detail about how the new 727 surpasses what has come before.

p.124

124
JL Audio Fathom f110v2 Subwoofer
Rives Bird offers a full technical and musical assessment of the smallest Fathom model from subwoofer specialist JL Audio. Plus: Rives takes you on a tour of the massive JL Audio factory.

134
Dan D'Agostino Master Audio Systems Progression Integrated Amplifier
The Progression brings all the virtues of Dan D'Agostino's designs—great sound quality, fabulous build, stunning casework—to a more affordable price. Anthony H. Cordesman evaluates this new integrated along with its optional streaming and phono functions.

p.134

Departments

12
Letters

16
From the Editor
Robert Harley on the primacy of the listening experience.

19
Video Preview
A snapshot of new videos on *The Absolute Sound*'s YouTube channel.

20
Future TAS
New products on the horizon.

159
Manufacturer Comments

192
Q&A
We talk with Josh Clark of Rockport Technologies.

WADAX

Different By Design

When The Absolute Sound recognised the Wadax Reference PSU and AKASA DC cable as Products of The Year 2023, it also recognised a fundamental truth: there's more to cutting-edge digital performance than processing and sample rates.

2023 the absolute sound PRODUCT OF THE YEAR AWARD

In fact, banishing spurious noise from the digital domain is even more important than it is for analog. It demands that you pay attention to shielding and isolation, to clock noise and grounding. But above all, it means paying attention to the multiple power supplies that power a complex digital system.

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WADAX

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Letters

Email the Editor: rharley@nextscreen.com or: TAS, 2500 McHale Ct., Ste. A, Austin, Texas 78758

Diversity of Design Approaches

I read with interest the reviews of the Esoteric Grandioso T1 and tonearm and the Basis Bravo turntable and Vector tonearm [Issue 341]. It was perhaps serendipitous to have both reviews in the same issue, as the design ethos in each turntable/tonearm could not have been more different: the weight of the T1 being close to 139 pounds versus the Bravo's 28 pounds; the unipivot arm used on the Basis versus Esoteric's in-house arm that's not a unipivot design; the magnetic drive with clock generator in the T1 versus a more traditional external motor with belt used in the Bravo; and lastly the price—$107,000 "all-in" with the T1 versus $16,000 for the Basis with the Vector 4 arm.

It's interesting that both units were very impressive, and the reviews spoke glowingly about each. Yet, the design approaches were so different that the results, in terms of cost to make, were a universe apart. Unintentional or not, the contrast was a perfect example of what frustrates many yet should not. The price of the T1 is not something that I could justify spending relative to my budget, and juxtaposed with the Basis and its review, why would I? Yet, that's not what I came away with. Rather, I appreciated the designs of both turntables and was impressed by the technologies involved, particularly the T1. What other hobby do we have wherein you have many choices, mostly all good, that can be available to a wide spectrum of enthusiasts fortunate to purchase them if they wish. I personally own a VPI HRX with a uni-pivot Fatboy tonearm and am quite happy with it. But if I wanted to change my rig, if for no other reason than I want something new, it's refreshing to see the diversity of design approaches, prices, and manufacturers in our hobby today. This is healthy for our collective pursuit. I hope *The Absolute Sound* never retreats from reviewing "ultra" high end just because of price.

My second comment is that while the Bravo's design approach to combat the well-known "dynamic azimuth error" of a unipivot is very eloquent, I want to remind readers that VPI has for a few years now offered their "Dual Pivot" assembly. This, too, will eliminate the azimuth challenge. It works wonderfully well. You folks ought to review it!

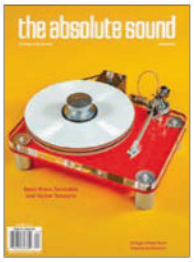
My third comment is about the reviews themselves. Most are interesting to me, and some products I am thinking about purchasing. This was the case in your May/June issue with Mr. Cordesman's review of the Technics S-G700M2 CD/SACD. I purchased one a week after reading his review and waited a few months before commenting. The unit is everything described in the review and more. Downsizing from a two-box Esoteric CD/DAC setup to the Technics allowed me to connect my Mac mini serving as my Roon core directly to the Technics. I have a less cluttered system and the sound from a CD, SACD, or streaming hi-res audio is terrific. In Mr. Cordesman's words, "highly recommended" to all your readers. Thank you so much for that review. Keep up the good work and faith! I've been a subscriber since I got back into hi-fi roughly 23 years ago.

Jeffrey Mead

MBL Omnidirectional Questions

After receiving my October 2023 of *The Absolute Sound* and seeing the MBL 101 X-Treme MKII on the front cover, I couldn't wait to dive into the review. Jonathan Valin did a terrific job of describing his experience with the speaker system. His words made me feel as if I were sitting in the room with him, experiencing the same thing.

There are a couple of sound presentation aspects that I was not able to grasp during my reading. The first has to do with the naturalness of the 360-degree dispersion of sound. For live orchestral music, it makes perfect sense to have the sound of the hall surrounding you. However, for studio recorded material, the treble region seems that it might be out of place. For instance, when a guitar string is plucked with a pick, the pick sound is naturally projected forward and does not get projected out the back of the instrument. With the *Radialstrahler*, that same pluck of the string would be projected 360 degrees. The same might be true with the blat of a trumpet or similar type sound.



The second observation has to do with placement of the subwoofer stack and its impact on the 360-degree presentation. Since the subwoofer stack is as tall as the Radialstrahler, it can be an imposing object to allow the sound emanating from the Radialstrahler to get past. It would create a null in the room where the subwoofer stack is. Also, the closer the subwoofer is to the Radialstrahler, the larger the null would be to the walls behind the sub. I don't see the ribbed surface of the subwoofer stack being very reflective to take the place of the wall behind. I would imagine it is quite the opposite by scattering the sound wave. This null would be multiplied by two (one on each side of the room).

While I will most likely never even see these speakers, I'm just curious if these are things that should be considered when auditioning for a purchase.

Joe Clawson

UPCOMING IN TAS 346

- **Full report from The Capital Audiofest**
- **Avantgarde Trio G3 loudspeaker**
- **OMA K3 turntable**
- **PS Audio DirectStream DAC MKII**
- **Crystal Cable Minissimo Forte loudspeaker**
- **Cabasse Abyss integrated amp with DSP speaker correction**
- **MoFi SourcePoint 8 loudspeaker**
- **SOTA Quasar turntable and Pyxi phonostage**
- **Wilson Benesch Omnium loudspeaker**

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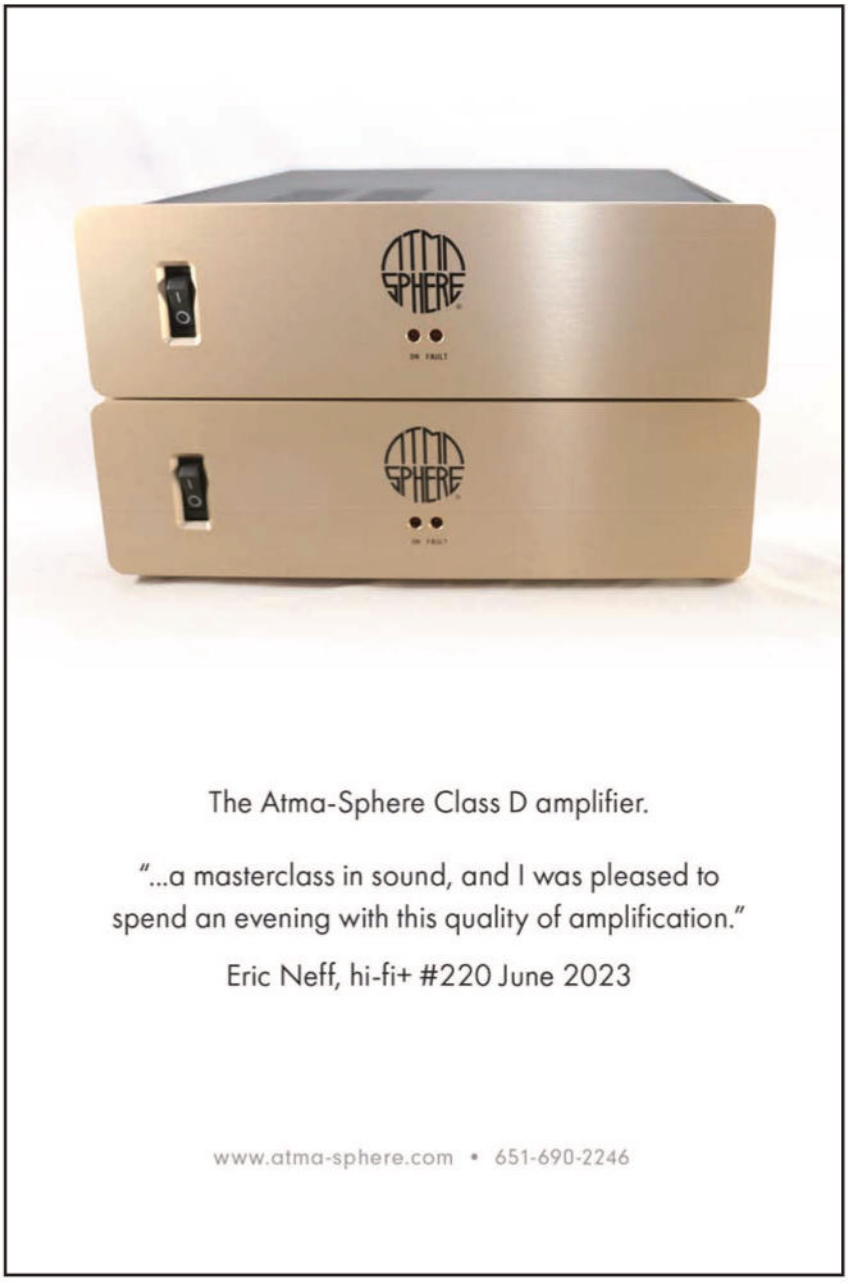
Letters

Email the Editor: rharley@nextscreen.com or: TAS, 2500 McHale Ct., Ste. A, Austin, Texas 78758

JV replies: Thank you for the kind words. As for your questions/observations, on your first point, as I noted in the review, a sizable percentage of any sound that an instrument makes in a hall or a studio will be projected omnidirectionally, and some amount of the omnidirectional "nimbus" or bloom of that sound will be captured by the microphones. (This is part of the reason that instruments, voices, and soundstages seem to have dimensionality on recordings, including certain studio ones.) Even pizzicatos aren't just launched in one direction (i.e., towards the listener). They cause the strings to snap against the guitar's neck, and that transient is picked up, amplified, and broadcast by the neck and body of the instrument. On point two, yes, the subwoofer stacks sit behind (and to the side) of the Radialstrahlers, close to the corners of the room. Obviously, things their size aren't acoustically transparent, so they're going to affect reflectivity to some extent. Of course, they're also going to reflect the sound launched in their direction, including some measure toward the walls behind and to the sides of them. This is rather like the situation in an orchestra, where the instrumentalists sitting next to and behind one another are going to affect reflectivity to a degree. This does not mean that the sounds they make aren't being projected omnidirectionally.

Of course, they're also going to reflect the sound launched in their direction, including some measure toward the walls behind and to the sides of them.



Well, Here you Are

I have written to you before and never received a response, let alone had my letter printed in your magazine, but I'm writing you again. I just breezed through the November issue and find it disappointing to see only one letter to the editor printed. When the magazine first started there were a dozen or more. Unfortunately, the quantity has shriveled over the years. I find it interesting and valuable to see what other readers are thinking.

With the current issue being the Buyer's Guide, it wouldn't hurt to mention somewhere that many of the prices have increased 25 to 30 percent within the last year or two.

Doug Zielinski

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From the Editor

The Primacy of Listening

A reader question on *The Absolute Sound*'s Substack newsletter asked us to explain the technical basis of grounding devices such as the Shunyata Altaira I reviewed in Issue 334. The writer cited a website that he called a "credible audio source," which claimed grounding devices made no sonic difference. Indeed, the website ridiculed the category. He asked us to "rebut the criticism from the naysayers."

I've long since learned to ignore critics who dismiss the audibility of a phenomenon purely on a primitive theoretical understanding of the "scientific high ground." It's not incumbent upon us to "prove" to the skeptics that a particular product renders an audible difference. Even if you can show, say, a lower noise floor, the anti-audiophile brigade dismisses such an improvement as beyond human hearing. These naysayers are not impartial seekers of truth but rather partisan combatants. They dismiss the observations of critical listeners without listening themselves, invoking the false claim that they have science on their side.

Audio history is filled with example after example of phenomena that were ridiculed only to be later proven, with scientific certainty, to be real and audible. Critical listeners, who trust their ears, don't need measurements or conformity with incomplete theory to validate their personal experiences.

For just one example, the idea that the digital interface between a source and DAC could introduce an analog-like variability in the sound was once dismissed as the height of audiophile lunacy. It is incontrovertible that all interface types transmit the data without error; it was an article of faith that if the ones and zeros are the same, the sound is the same. But a few years after the first reports of audible differences between interfaces, the precise electrical phenomenon that introduced that variability was revealed—in granular technical detail—in a peer-reviewed paper written by respected academics (*Journal of the Audio Engineering Society*, "Is the AES/EBU and SPDIF Interface Flawed" by Malcolm Hawksford and Chris Dunn). Today, interface jitter is universally accepted as the source of variability in the sound quality of digital interfaces.

I'm reminded of the quote by the great audio thinker Richard Heyser: "One of the most belittling experiences is to deride the 'black art' of a craftsman who gets consistent results by a certain ritual which he cannot explain and then to discover that his actions in fact held a deeper technical significance than we understood from our simplified model."

It could have easily been called "The Audiophile's Manifesto."

Another expression of this observation comes from Michael Polanyi's influential 1958 book *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy*: "Whenever connoisseurship is found operating within science or technology, we may assume that it persists only because it has not been possible to replace it by a measurable grading."

I wrote a 12,000-word Audio Engineering Society paper (and presented it at the 1991 New York Convention) on this subject. It's called "The Role of Critical Listening in Evaluating Audio Equipment Quality," but it could have easily been called "The Audiophile's Manifesto."

As for the efficacy of grounding products, I advised the reader that he should discover for himself whether they make a difference. Simply visit a Shunyata dealer and have him demonstrate the Altaira system. Make up your own mind based on firsthand listening experience, not on the say-so of some self-proclaimed "scientific expert" with an agenda.

For the record, I provided a detailed technical description of how grounding products work in my review of the Altaira. You can also watch my video interview with Shunyata founder Cailin Gabriel on our YouTube channel.

I'll share with you an interesting story about the Altaira. A distributor recently visited with power amplifiers for me to review. We first listened to the system with my reference CH Precision M10 amplifiers and then connected his amplifiers. When we switched amplifiers, I neglected to move the Altaira's ground cables from the CH Precision to the new amplifiers.

After about two hours of listening to the new amplifiers, it occurred to me that I should connect the newly installed amps to the Altaira. When we listened to the new amplifiers with the Altaira, the visitor, who had no previous experience with a grounding product, was shocked at the improvement. We didn't go back and forth, listening to different music trying to discern a difference. The sonic improvement was instantly audible and unmistakable.

My final advice to the reader with the question about grounding devices? Don't listen to the naysayers. Don't even listen to me. Rather, audition a grounding product yourself and reach your own conclusions. There's absolutely no substitute for firsthand listening experience. As Linn Products' founder Ivor Tiefenbrun famously said, "If you haven't heard it, you don't have an opinion."

Robert Harley

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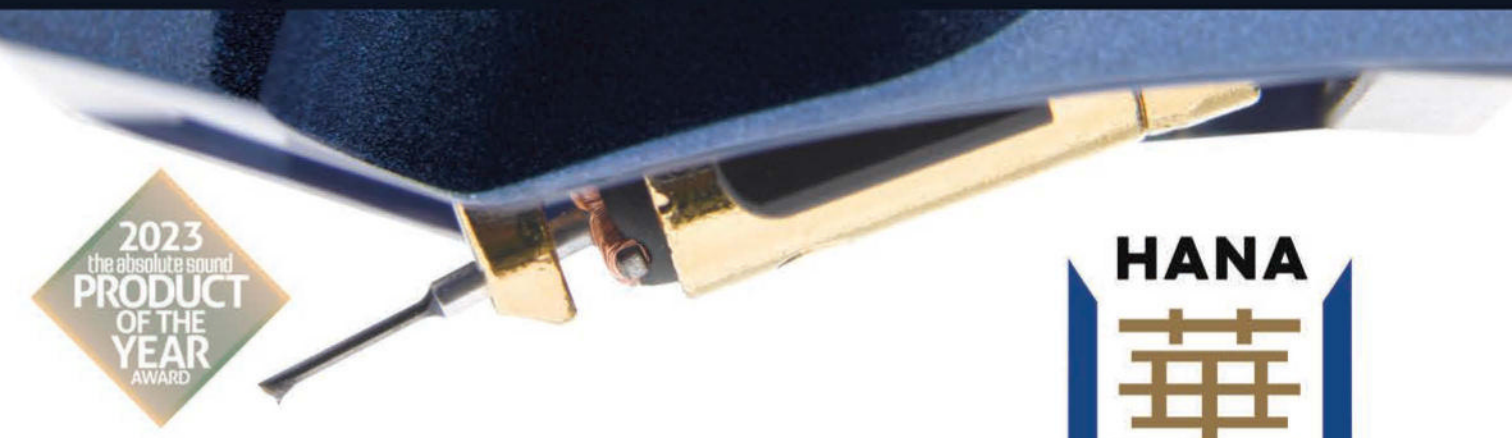

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Hana SL - International HiFi Press Awards 2019
Hana SL - Tone Audio 2018
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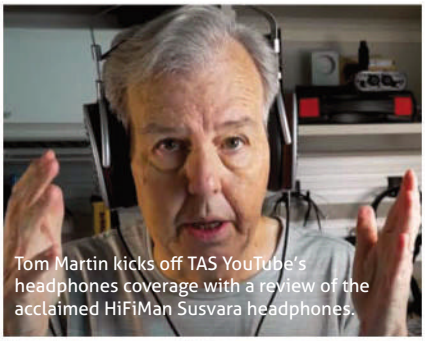
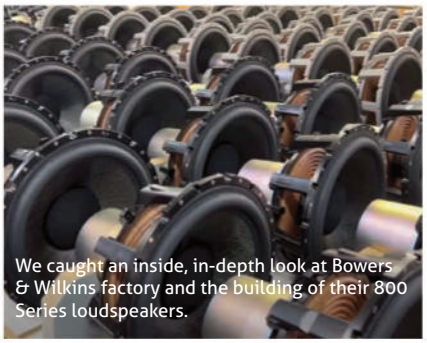
Video Preview

Dan Wakefield of McIntosh gives an overview of their new, monstrous, PS2K powered subwoofer.


Tom Martin kicks off TAS YouTube's headphones coverage with a review of the acclaimed HiFiMan Susvara headphones.


We caught an inside, in-depth look at Bowers & Wilkins factory and the building of their 800 Series loudspeakers.

TAS newcomer Michael Johnson reviews Metronome's new AQWO 2 Hybrid DAC + SACD/CD + Streamer.

The Absolute Sound's YouTube Channel

Robert Harley

If you're looking for more great high-end audio coverage, check out *The Absolute Sound*'s new YouTube video channel. Our channel is chockfull of videos (more than 125 and counting) that cover everything from a nostalgic look at classic audio products to reviews of the latest components. We've got behind-the-scenes factory tours, show reports, audio-basics tutorials, and designer interviews.

We've also got product reviews, primarily of lower to mid-priced components that are stunning overachievers. New videos on our channel include an extended tour (in 4k video) of Michael Fremer's listening room. The newest video is an in-depth look at the design and construction of my listening room, including tips on how to improve your room's acoustics at minimal expense. A second companion video takes you through all the components in my reference system. Among the other new videos is Tom Martin's review of the HiFiMan Susvara headphones, a look at McIntosh's new $50k subwoofer, Michael Fremer's tour of one of the world's largest record-pressing plants, my interview with Luke Milnes of Wilson Benesch as we set up the new Omnium speaker in my listening room, and a factory tour of Bowers & Wilkins and the building of the 800-Series loudspeakers. That's just a sampling of lots of fresh new videos (more than 150 and counting) on our YouTube channel.

Video is an exciting way of delivering more, and more varied, content than we can provide in the magazine. We also hope to reach the next generation of music lovers who care about sound quality. Go to youtube.com/@TheTASmagazine. While you're there, be sure to hit the "Subscribe" button so that you're notified of new videos. You can also sign up for our weekly newsletter. I hope that you'll check it out. tas

Transparent Audio PowerBank 6 AC Power System

The PowerBank 6 from Transparent Audio is a six-outlet AC-distribution product that offers surge protection and power conditioning for music and film systems. It works well with all Transparent products to remove line noise and modulation distortion, while also suppressing surges and spikes without the use of transformers or other series-filtering devices, which limit current capability and can add distortions. The PowerBank 6 provides unrestricted noise-free power. Its compact chassis is perfect for desktop or rack, and a 6-foot hard-wired power cord is included and is upgradable. Other features include high-current surge-protected U.S. outlets, Gigabit-network-source surge protector (its Avalanche diode surge protection never wears out), non-current-limiting noise-rejection filtration, Transparent's Connected Equipment Warranty, and upgradeability to any PowerIsolator Series products.

Price: $995. transparentcable.com

B.audio Alpha One Integrated Amplifier

The French manufacturer B.audio's first streaming integrated amplifier, the Alpha One, is the result of experience acquired during the development of the company's Reference Series electronics and represents a synthesis of B.audio's technological know-how. It combines cutting-edge digital electronics and conversion, volume control, and multiple analog and digital inputs with a dual-mono, 120Wpc Class AB amplifier. B.audio's proprietary EX networking module offers 64-bit active acoustic correction and advanced streaming capabilities. It's a Roon-certified endpoint, enables Qobuz, Tidal, and Spotify streaming, and includes Apple's wireless AirPlay connectivity. The Alpha's built-in room-correction software helps to bring the system in sync with the unique acoustic characteristics of any room. B.audio develops and builds in-house all the main components of its products. The manufacturing of casework and electronic boards is carried out in France; final assembly occurs in the company's workshops in Saint Hippolyte, in the heart of the Alsatian vineyards.

Price: $17,000. monarch-systems.com

McIntosh PS2K Powered Subwoofer

With four 13" woofers and massive magnets, the PS2K Powered Subwoofer from McIntosh Laboratories is powerful, to say the least. The system uses McIntosh's patented Low Distortion High Performance (LD/HP) Magnetic Circuit Design to significantly reduce distortion while increasing the drivers' power handling and efficiency. Each of the woofers is driven by a dedicated 500W Class D amplifier. The PS2K further pushes the pinnacle of McIntosh craftsmanship with its innovative multi-layer carbon-fiber cones that are strong, can resist long-duration extended-excursion travel, and are made rigid to reduce flexing. The PS2K features a variety of connection options that are compatible with virtually any installation. Equipped with two McIntosh protection technologies, Power Guard® (a feature created to prevent harsh-sounding clipping in real time) and Sentry Monitor™ (a fuse-less short-circuit protection circuit, which automatically resets when operating conditions return to normal), the PS2K comes in a high-gloss black finish with carbon trim and an aluminum base.

Price: $50,000. mcintoshgroup.com

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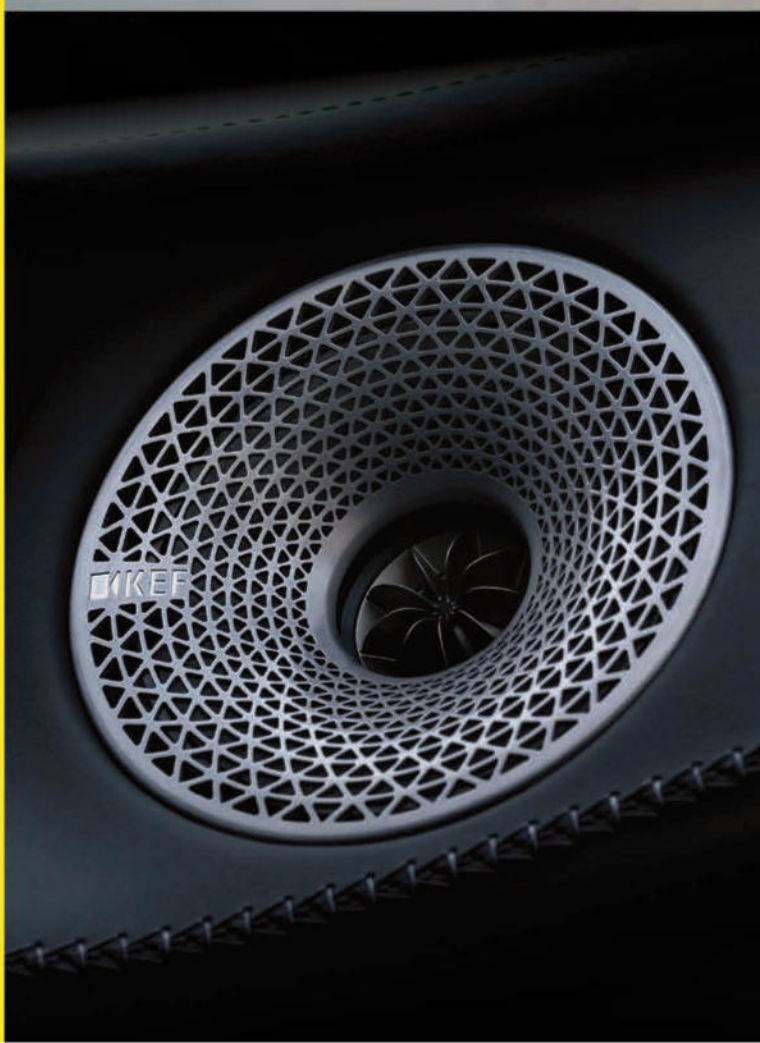
In a partnership between two iconic British brands sharing an obsession with creating the best experience, our collaboration has extended from in-car audio systems to KEF x Lotus products for the home. A state-of-the-art wireless high-fidelity speaker system, LS60 Wireless allows you to stream from any source and connect to any home audio devices with audiophile-grade power. Inspired by British Racing Green of the Lotus heritage, LS60 Wireless Lotus Edition brings the track spirit into your home in a harmony of design and innovation.



2023 TAS Super LP List

50th Anniversary Edition

By Jonathan Valin, Harry Pearson, Michael Fremer, and the TAS Staff

Of the many articles and reviews that Harry Pearson wrote for *The Absolute Sound*, his annual Super LP List (aka SuperDisc List) may have been the most eagerly anticipated. The issue in which it was published was the one that everyone *had* to buy, borrow, or copy. Why? Because whether you were rich or poor, active in the high-end audio market or just kicking tires, it was the one issue of TAS you could make daily practical use of—it was your road map to the absolute sound.

It is our aim here to preserve and expand upon what Harry created. While it may not ignite the frenzy that it once did, TAS' new Super LP List contains every LP that HP recommended when the list was last published by him. It also contains hundreds of titles that JV and the TAS staff have deemed worthy of adding.

For this, our 50th Anniversary Edition of the annual TAS feature, JV is delighted to acknowledge the assistance of Michael Fremer, who will now be a mainstay of the TAS Super LP List. Thanks to Michael, several of the longstanding titles on the list have been updated to better pressings. Michael has also suggested several new titles, though you should know (lest Michael be accused of recommending albums that aren't to his taste) that the majority of the new entries (and the older ones, of course) are my own.

In keeping with HP's practice, each entry new to this latest version of the list is **bolded** and marked with a red dagger symbol (†), and those recordings that are still available new or re-issued are marked with a double dagger (‡). LPs with particularly natural, as opposed to hi-fi spectacular, sound have been awarded an asterisk (*). And LPs that are recommended for music and performance ahead of sonics are given a plus sign (+).

This probably goes without saying, but be aware that a few of the most recent pop entries have "adult" lyrics. Also be aware that I've added a few "Easter eggs" from way back when in honor of TAS' 50th Anniversary. **JV**

BEST OF THE BUNCH: Classical

- Arnold: English, Scottish, & Cornish Dances. Lyrita SRCS-109
- Brahms/Debussy/Bartók: Sonatas/Abel, Steinberg. Wilson Audiophile/Analogue Productions 8722*‡
- Gerhard: *The Plague*. Decca Head 6
- Gershwin: *Porgy & Bess* complete/Maazel. Decca SET 609-11*
- Herold-Lanchbery: *La Fille Mal Gardée*/Lanchbery, Orchestra of the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden. Decca/OR-GLP0109-45L (45rpm, 2LP)*‡
- *Hi-Fi a la Española*. Mercury/Classic SR-90144*
- Holst: *The Planets*/Mehta, LA. Decca/ORG 122-45 (45rpm)*‡
- Mahler: Ninth Symphony/Barbirolli, Berlin Phil. ERC/EMI ASD 596/597*‡
- Prokofiev: *Scythian* Suite. Mercury/ORG 118-45 (45rpm)*‡
- Rachmaninoff: Piano Concerto No. 3/Janis. Mercury/Speakers Corner SR-90283*‡
- Ravel: *La Valse*/Paray. Mercury/Classic SR-90313*‡
- Respighi: *Feste Romane*/Maazel. Decca SXL-6822
- Stravinsky: *The Firebird*/Dorati, LSO. Mercury/ORG 0163-45 (180g, 45rpm, 2LP)‡
- Widor: Symphony No. 6, Allegro. Mercury SR-90169

BEST OF THE BUNCH: Popular

- Bachrach: *Casino Royale*. Colgems/Classic Records 5005Q‡
- *Balalaika Favorites*. Mercury/Classic Records SR90310-45 (45rpm)‡
- *Belafonte At Carnegie Hall: The Complete Concert*. RCA/Analogue Productions LSP/AAPF-6006 (45rpm)*‡
- **Miles Davis: *Kind of Blue*. Columbia/Analogue Productions UHQR004 (200g)‡**
- Ellington: *For Duke*. M & K Realtime UMK&K101*
- Vanessa Fernandez: *Use Me*. Groove Note GRV 1050-1 (One-Step, 180g, 45rpm, 2LP)‡
- Ralph Hunter Choir: *The Wild, Wild West*. RCA LSP-l968*
- Dean Martin: *Dream with Dean*. Reprise/Analogue Productions 076-45 (45rpm)*‡
- *Music for Bang, Ba-room and Harp*. RCA/Analogue Productions LSP-1866‡
- Pink Floyd: *Dark Side of the Moon*. EMI Harvest SHVL-804‡
- Santana: *Abraxas*. Columbia/Mobile Fidelity Sound Lab UD1S 2-001*‡
- Don Shirley: *Water Boy*. Columbia CS-9196*
- **Steely Dan: *Aja*. Analogue Productions AUHQR 0014-45 (45rpm, 200g, 2LP)**
- Claire Teal with the Syd Lawrence Orchestra: *A Tribute to Ella Fitzgerald*. Chasing the

SUPER LP LIST

Dragon CTDLPI003 (180g, D2D)*‡
- *The Weavers Reunion at Carnegie Hall, 1963*. Vanguard/Analogue Productions 005*‡
- *Winds of War and Peace*/Graham, National Symphonic Winds. Wilson Audiophile/Analogue Productions AAPC 8823-45 (45rpm, 2LP)‡

SPECIAL MERIT: Classical

- Adams: *Harmonielehre*/DeWaart, San Francisco Symphony. Nonesuch 79115
- Adams: *Must The Devil Have All The Good Tunes?*/Yang, Dudamel, LA Phil. DG 49801‡
- Alain: Organ Works (complete). Erato EDO-250/2
- Albeniz: *Iberia* (complete)/PCO, Morel. Decca/RCA/Analogue Productions AAPC 6094‡
- Albeniz: *Suite Española*/De Burgos, New Philharmonia. London CS-6581/ORG 100 (45rpm, 2LP)‡
- Anderson: *Music of Leroy Anderson (Vol. II)*. Mercury SR-90043
- Antill: *Corroboree*. (Australian) EMI OASD-7603
- Arnold: Guitar Concerto/Bream. RCA/Analogue Productions AAPC 2487*‡
- Arnold: Overtures. Reference Recordings RR-48
- Arnold: *Peterloo* Overture: Symphony No. 5. EMI ASD-2878
- Babbitt: *All Set*/Contemporary Chamber Ensemble. Nonesuch 71303
- **Bach: Brandenburg Concertos/Klemperer, Philharmonia. Columbia SAX 2408 (9LPs)†+**
- Bach: *Goldberg* Variations/Gould. Columbia ML 5060 (mono)+
- Bach: *Goldberg* Variations/Gould. CBS Masterworks 37779+
- Bach: The Keyboard Concertos/Gould. Columbia/Speakers Corner 71449‡
- Bach: Six Solo Cello Suites/Starker. Mercury/Analogue Productions AAPC 39016-P (45rpm, 6LP)‡
- Bach: 6 Suites for Violincello/Fournier. Archiv Produktion 479 696-3 (180g, Limited Edition, Numbered, 3LP)‡
- Bach: Cello Suites/Pearson, Silva, Rockhill. Chasing the Dragon CTDLP1014 (180g, D2D, 5LP)*‡
- Bach: Sonatas and Partitas for Solo Violin/Grumiaux. Philips 835198/200*
- Bach: Sonatas and Partitas for Solo Violin/Milstein. Analogphonic/Capitol 43130 (180g, 3LP, mono)‡+
- Bach-Elgar: Fantasia and Fugue in C Minor. EMI ASD-2970
- Bach-Stokowski: Symphonic Transcriptions. Chandos ABRD-1055
- Bacewicz: Music for Strings, Trumpets, and Percussion/Rowicki. Philips PHS900-141*
- Baird: Four Dialogues for Oboe and Chamber Orchestra/Rowicki. Muza XL/XSL 03360*
- Balbastre: Harpsichord Works. Afka SK-298
- Barber: *Knoxville Summer of 1915*/Price, Schippers. RCA LSC-3062*
- Barber: Overture to *The School for Scandal*/Schippers. Columbia CBS 32110006*
- Barber: Symphony No. 1/Zinman. Argo 436 288*
- Barber: Violin Concerto/Ricci, Pacific Symphony. Reference Recordings RR-45
- Bartók: Concerto For Orchestra/Reiner, CSO. RCA/Analogue Productions LSC-1934*‡
- Bartók: Concerto For Orchestra//Szell, Cleveland. Columbia MS 6815
- Bartók: Divertimento For String Orchestra/Barshai. Decca 6026
- Bartók: Music for Strings, Percussion & Celesta/Karajan, Berlin Phil. Columbia SAX 2432*
- Bartók: Music for Strings, Percussion & Celesta/Reiner, CSO. RCA/Analogue Productions LSC-2374*‡
- Bartók: Piano Concerto No. 3/Katchen, Kertesz. Decca SXL 6209/Linn Recut REC 01*
- **Bartók: Second Suite/Dorati, Minneapolis Symphony. Mercury SR 90098†**
- Bartók: Six String Quartets/Juilliard Quartet. Columbia D3S 717*
- Bartók: Sonata for 2 Pianos & Percussion/Solti, Perahia. CBS Masterworks M 42625
- Bartók: String Quartet No. 3/New Music String Quartet. Bartók Records No. 901 (mono)‡
- Bartók: Violin Sonata No. 1/Mann, Hambro. Bartók Records No. 922 (mono)‡+
- Bax: Symphony No. 6. Musical Heritage Soc MHS 1198
- Beethoven: *Appassionata* Sonata/Kamiya. RCA/JVC RDC-4
- **Beethoven: Bagatelles, Op. 33 & Op. 126/Gould. Columbia Masterworks M 33265†**
- Beethoven: Cellosonaten/Rostropovich, Richter. Philips/Speakers Corner EURO2920‡
- Beethoven: *Complete Symphonies*/Rattle, Berlin Phil. Berlin Philharmonic Recordings‡
- Beethoven: *Complete Symphonies: The Remastered Edition*/Bernstein, Vienna Philharmonic. DG DGLP98721‡
- **Beethoven: Diabelli Variations/Katchen. Decca SXL 2262†**
- Beethoven: Grosse Fugue/Karajan, Berlin Philharmonic. DG 2330 066
- Beethoven: *Nine Symphonies*/von Karajan, Berlin Philharmonic. Deutsche Grammophon DG37875 (9LP)
- **Beethoven: Overtures/Kempe, Berlin Phil. EMI ASD 336†**
- **Beethoven: Piano Concerto No. 1/Fleisher, Szell, Cleveland. Columbia SCX 3567†**
- Beethoven: Piano Concerto No.2/Rubinstein, Barenboim. RCA ARL1-4711
- **Beethoven: Piano Concerto No. 3/Fleisher, Szell, Cleveland. Columbia SCX 3572†**
- Beethoven: Piano Concerto No. 4/Gould, Bernstein. Columbia/Impex 6011‡
- **Beethoven: Piano Concerto No. 5/Curzon, Knappertsbusch, Vienna Phil. Decca SLX 2002†**
- Beethoven: Piano Sonatas "Moonlight" & "Pathétique"/Lenehan. Chasing The Dragon CTDLP1012 (180g, D2D)*‡
- Beethoven: Piano Sonata No. 21/Knight. Wilson Audiophile/Analogue Productions AAPC 8313‡
- Beethoven: Piano Sonata No. 29 "Hammerklavier"/Pollini. Deutsche Grammophon 2530 869
- Beethoven: Quartet No. 14, Op. 131 (arr. for orchestra)/Bernstein, Vienna Philharmonic. DG 2531 077
- Beethoven: Quartets Op. 14, No. 1, Op. 59, No. 3/New Music String Quartet. Bartók Records No. 909 (mono)‡
- Beethoven: Sonatas for Violincello and Piano/Mainardi, Zecchi. DG 43153‡
- Beethoven: String Trios Nos. 1 and 3/Heifetz, Primrose, Piatigorsky. RCA LM 2186 (mono)+
- Beethoven. Symphony No. 5/C. Kleiber, Vienna Philharmonic. Deutsche Grammophon DGR 31881‡
- Beethoven: Symphony No. 6/Walter, Columbia Symphony. Columbia/Analogue Productions AAPC 077-45-P (45rpm)‡
- Beethoven: Symphony No. 6/Bohm, Vienna Phil. DG 008 (180g, 2LP)‡
- Beethoven: Symphony No. 7/C. Kleiber, Vienna Philharmonic. Deutsche Grammophon 2530 706
- Beethoven: Symphony No. 9/Solti, Chicago. Decca GBB-121/2
- Beethoven: Triple Concerto/Mutter, Ma, Karajan, Berlin Phil. DG 4838851 (180g)‡
- Beethoven: Triple Concerto/Serkin, Laredo, Parnas. Columbia/Speakers Corner EUROS6564‡
- Beethoven: Violin Sonatas Nos. 3 & 8/Szeryng, Rubinstein. RCA/Analogue Productions AAPC 2507
- Beethoven: Violin Sonatas Nos. 5 & 9/Oistrakh. Philips/Speakers Corner 835259‡
- **Beethoven: Violin Sonata No. 8/Szeryng, Rubinstein. RCA Victor/Analogue Productions AAPC 2620†‡**
- Beethoven: Violin Sonata No. 9 "Kreutzer"/Francescatti, Casadesus. Columbia/Speakers Corner EUROS6125‡
- Beethoven: Violin Sonata, Op.96/Abel, Steinberg. Wilson Audiophile/Analogue Productions 8315*‡
- Beethoven: *Young Beethoven: String Trio in C Minor*/Janaki String Trio. Yarlung YAR 53966-45 (45rpm)‡
- Bennett: 5 Studies For Piano/Bennett. Argo ZRG 704

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***Neil Gader, The Absolute Sound* (Issue 342)**

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SUPER LP LIST

- Bennett: Piano Concerto/Stephen Bishop, Gibson, London SO. Philips 6500301
- Berg: Piano Sonata/Gould. Columbia ML 5336 (mono)+
- Berg: *Lulu* & *Wozzeck* Suites. Mercury SR-90278
- Berg: String Quartet. New Music String Quartet. Bartók Records No. 906 (mono)‡
- Berg: Three Movements from *Lyric* Suite (arr. string orchestra), Craft. Columbia M2S 620
- Berg: Violin Concerto/Mutter. DG 437 093
- Berio: *Cries of London*/Swingle II. Decca Head 15
- Berio: Sinfonia/Swingle Singers, Berio, New York Phil. Columbia MS 7268
- Berlioz: *Nuits d'été*/Crespin, Ansermet. Decca SXL 6081
- Berlioz: Requiem/Fremaux, et al. EMI SLS-982
- Berlioz: *Symphonie Fantastique*/Munch, BSO. RCA/Classic LSC-1900*
- Biber: Sonatas Of The Rosary/Melkus. DG/Analogphonic 143166 (180g, 2LP)‡
- Birtwistle: *The Triumph of Time*/Boulez. Argo ZRG-790
- Bizet: *Carmen* Suite/Gibson. RCA/Analogue Productions LSC-2449‡
- Bizet: *L'arlésienne* Suites 1 and 2/Morel, ROHO. Decca/RCA/Analogue Productions AAPC 2237-P‡
- Bliss: Music for Strings. Lyrita SRCS-33*
- Bloch: Concerto Grosso No. 1. Mercury SR-90223*
- Borodin: Symphony No. 2, No. 3/Ansermet. London/ORG 153 (45rpm)‡
- Borodin: Symphony No. 2/LSO, Martinon. Decca/RCA/Analogue Productions AAPC 2298‡
- Boulez: *Pli Selon Pli*/Boulez. Columbia M30296/Erato 98495
- Brahms: Alto Rhapsody/Walter. Columbia MS-6488
- Brahms: Ten Intermezzi/Gould. Columbia MS 6237
- Brahms: Piano Concerto No. 1/Curzon, Szell. London/ORGLP0103-45 (45rpm, 2LP)‡
- Brahms: Piano Concerto No. 2/Kovacevich, Davis. Philips 9500 682
- Brahms: Sextuor a Cordes No. 1, Op. 18/Les Musiciens. Harmonia Mundi HM 1073
- Brahms: Sonata for Cello/Starker. Mercury/Speakers Corner SR-90392*‡
- Brahms: Symphonien 1–4/Rattle, Berlin Phil. Berlin Philharmonic Recordings BPHR 160041 (180g, 6LP, D2D)*
- Brahms: Symphony No. 4/Walter, Columbia Symphony Orchestra. Columbia MS 6113
- Brahms: The Three Trios/Rubinstein, Szeryng, Fournier. RCA Red Seal ARL3-0138
- Brahms: Violin Concerto/Szeryng, Dorati, LSO. ORG 0170-45 (180g, 45rpm, 2LP)‡
- Brahms: Violin Concerto/Oistrakh, Szell. Angel Records SFO-36033
- Bredemeyer: *Schlagstück 5*. Nova 8 85 186
- Brian: Symphony No. 9. EMI ASD-3486
- Britten: *Four Sea Interludes*. EMI ASD-3154
- Britten: Nocturnes. London/ORG ORG-152-45 (45rpm, 2LP)‡
- Britten: *The Prince of the Pagodas*. Decca Ace-of-Diamonds GOS-558-9
- Britten: Sinfonietta. Lyrita SRCS1111
- Britten: Variations and Fugue on a Theme of Purcell/Britten. Decca SXL 610
- Britten: Variations on a Theme of Frank Bridge/Marriner. Argo ZRG 860
- Britten: *War Requiem*. Decca SET 252-3 (2LP)
- Bruch: Concerto in G Minor/Heifetz, Sargent, NSOL. RCA/Analogue Productions AAPC 2652-P‡
- Bruckner: Symphony No. 7/Haitink, Berlin Phil. Berlin Philharmonic Recordings (D2D)‡
- Busoni: Piano Concerto. EMI ASD-2336/7
- Byrd: Mass for Four Voice and Motets. Harmonia Mundi HM 55212
- Cage: String Quartet/New Music String Quartet. Columbia ML 4495 (mono)+
- Cage: *Third Construction*. New World/Classic NW-319*
- Carter: Piano Sonata/Rosen HMV ASD 601
- Carter: Sonata for Violincello & Piano/Greenhouse, Makas. American Recording Society ARS-25 (mono)+
- Carter: Variations for Orchestra/Levine, Chicago Symphony Orchestra. DG 431 698
- Chabrier: *España!*/Argenta. Decca/Speakers Corner SXL-2020*‡
- Chopin: *Chopin's Last Waltz*/Silverman. IsoMike 5606*‡
- Chopin: Concerto No. 1/Rubinstein, Skrowaczewki, NSOL. RCA/Analogue Productions AAPC 2575-P‡
- Chopin: Études Op. 10 & Op. 25/Pollini. Deutsche Grammophon 4796331‡
- Chopin: Sonata No. 3, etc./Argerich. DG 139317 SLPM
- Copland: *Appalachian Spring*/Bernstein, New York Phil. Columbia MS 6355
- Copland: *Appalachian Spring & Billy The Kid*/Dorati, LSO. ORG 144-45 (180g, 45rpm, 2LP)‡
- Copland: *Billy The Kid*, *Rodeo*/Gould. RCA/Analogue Productions AAPC 2195-P‡
- Copland: *Fanfare for the Common Man*, Third Symphony/Oue. Reference Recordings‡
- Copland: *Rodeo*. Mercury SR-90172
- Copland: Symphony No. 3/Copland. Columbia M35113
- Corigliano: Piano Concerto (1968)/Somer, Alessandro. Mercury Golden Import SRI 75118
- Crumb: Cello Sonata/Sylvester. Desto DC-7169
- Crumb: *Makrokosmos I*. Nonesuch H-71293
- Crumb: *Music for a Summer Eve: Makrokosmos III*. Nonesuch H-71311
- Dahl: Concerto a Tre/Lurie, Shapiro, Gottlieb. Columbia ML 4493 (mono)+
- Dahl: Concerto a Tre/Tashi. RCA ARL1-4328
- Debussy: *Gigues*, *Ibéria*/Argenta, L'Orchestre De La Suisse Romande. London/Speakers Corner (180g) SPC6013‡
- Debussy: *Iberia*. Mercury SR-90010
- Debussy: *Iberia*/Reiner, CSO. RCA/Analogue Productions LSC-2222*‡
- Debussy: *Images* (for piano)/Michelangeli. Deutsche Grammophon 250196
- Debussy: *Jeux*/Boulez, Cleveland Orchestra. DG 439 896
- **Debussy: *La mer*/Karajan, Berlin Phil. EMI ASD 3431†**
- Debussy: *Nocturnes*/Paray. Mercury/Speakers Corner AMER 90281*
- Debussy: *Nocturnes*/Ansermet, L'Orchestre De La Suisse Romande. Original Recordings Group ORG-169-45 (45rpm, 2LP)‡
- **Debussy: *Prelude to The Afternoon of a Faun/Leinsdorf, LA Phil.* Sheffield Labs 24 (D2D)†**
- Debussy/Rameau: Piano Pieces/Ólafsson. DG 483 8283 (2LP)‡
- Debussy: *The Sea*/Munch, BSO. RCA/Analogue Productions LSC-2111*‡
- Delius: *North Country Sketches*/Groves. EMI ASD-3139*
- Diamond: *Rounds for String Orchestra*/Schwarz, L.A. Nonesuch79002
- Dorati: Symphony. Mercury SR-90248
- Dubois: *Les Sept Paroles du Christ*/Radio Ville-Marie Choir, Fournier. Fidelis Audio FACD008‡
- Duruflé: Requiem. Epic BC-1256
- Dutilleux: *Ainsi la nuit*/Quartet Via Nova. Erato STU 71546
- Dutilleux: Cello Concerto/Rostropovitch, Orchestre de Paris. EMI ASD-3145
- Dutilleux: *Figures de résonances* (for two pianos). Erato STU 70810
- Dvorák: Cello Concerto/Starker. Mercury/Analogue Productions AAPC 90303-P (45rpm)*‡
- Dvorák: Sextet in A major/Auryn Quartet, Altenburger, Demenga. TACET L196*‡
- Dvorák: Symphony No. 8/Kertesz, LSO. Decca/Speakers Corner SXL-6044*‡
- Dvorák: Symphony No. 8/Walter. CBS/Sony 20 AC 1822
- Elgar: *Caratacus*. EMI SLS-998*
- Elgar: Cello Concerto, *Sea Pictures*/Du Pre, Baker. EMI Testament AEMI 655‡
- Elgar: *Coronation Ode*. EMI ASD 3345
- Elgar: *Engima* Variations/Mehta, LA. London CS-6816
- **Elgar: *Falstaff*/Boult EMI ASD 2970†**
- Elgar: *The Kingdom*. EMI SAN 244-5
- Elgar: Symphony No. 2/Barbirolli. EMI ASD-3266
- Faberman: *The All Star Percussion Ensemble*.

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SUPER LP LIST

First Impression Music GS001‡
- Falla: *Nights in the Gardens of Spain*/Soriano. Alto LEMI 545
- Falla: *The Three Cornered Hat*/Ansermet. Decca/ORG 102 (45rpm)‡
- Fellegara: Serenata/Hamburg Chamber Soloists. Time S8006
- Finzi: Cello Concerto/Ma, Handley, Royal Phil. Lyrita SRCS-112
- Finzi: *Dies Natalis*. World Record Club SCM-50*
- Finzi: *Intimations of Immortality*. Lyrita SRCS-75
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- **Bob Dylan: *Blood On The Tracks*. Columbia Records PC 33235†**
- Bob Dylan: *Bringing It All Back Home*. Columbia/Mobile Fidelity LMF2-462M (45rpm, mono)‡
- Bob Dylan: *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan*. Columbia/Mobile Fidelity MFSL 2-378‡
- Bob Dylan: *John Wesley Harding*. Columbia/Mobile Fidelity MFSL2-464M (45rpm, mono)‡
- Bob Dylan: *Love and Theft*. Columbia/MoFi MFSL 2-489 (45rpm, 180g, 2LP)‡
- Bob Dylan: *The Times They Are A-Changin'*. Columbia/Mobile Fidelity MFSL2-460M (45rpm, 2LP, mono)‡
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- Billie Eilish: *When We All Fall Asleep, Where Do We Go?* Darkroom/Interscope Records B0029729-01‡
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- El Vy: *Return to the Moon*. 4AD CAD 3530‡
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- Brian Eno: *Ambient 3: Day of Radiance*. EG Records EGAMB 03‡
- Brian Eno: *Ambient 4: On Land*. Editions EG 2335 228‡
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- Bill Evans: *The Paris Concert (Edition One)*. Elektra/ORG 070 (45rpm)‡
- Bill Evans: *Riverside Recordings*. Riverside/Analogue Productions AAPJ0018 (45rpm, 200g, 22LP)‡
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- Donald Fagen: *Sunken Condos*. Reprise 532287‡
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- Eileen Farrell: *Torch Songs*. Reference Recordings RR-34*‡
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- Vanessa Fernandez: *When The Levee Breaks*. Groove Note 1088 (45rpm)‡
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- Jeff Goldblum & The Mildred Snitzer Orchestra: *I Shouldn't Be Telling You This*. Decca 0602508060526‡
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- Ali Akbar Khan: *Music of India, Morning and Evening Ragas*. Connoisseur Society CS 1766
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- Radiohead: *A Moon Shaped Pool*. XL Recordings □ XLLP790‡
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- The Rolling Stones: *Tattoo You*. Rolling Stones Records COC 16052
- Sonny Rollins: *Saxophone Colossus*. Prestige/Analogue Productions 7079 (mono)‡
- Sonny Rollins: *Sonny Rollins Vol. 1*. Blue Note/Music Matters BNLP1542-45 (45rpm)‡
- Sonny Rollins: *Tenor Madness*. Prestige/Analogue Productions APRJ 7047 (200g, mono)‡
- Sonny Rollins: *Way Out West*. Fantasy/Analogue Productions 7530
- Linda Ronstadt: *Heart Like A Wheel*. Mobile Fidelity LMF472‡
- Linda Ronstadt: *Simple Dreams*. Analogue Productions AAPP 074-45 (45pm)‡
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- Rough Trade: *Avoid Freud*. True North TN-43
- Rough Trade: *For Those Who Think Young*. True North TN-48
- Rough Trade: *Shaking the Foundations*. True North TN-50
- St. Vincent: *MassEducation*. Loma Vista LVR00448‡
- St. Vincent: *Masseduction*. Loma Vista 225‡
- **St. Vincent: *Daddy's Home*. Loma Vista LVR01794†‡**
- Salt City Six: *Dixieland*. Audiophile AP-80
- Cécile McLorin Salvant: *Dreams And Daggers*. Mack Avenue Records MAC 1120LP (3LP)‡
- **Cécile McLorin Salvant: *Ghost Song*. Nonesuch 659067†‡**
- Cécile McLorin Salvant: *Woman Child*. Mack Avenue MAC 1072‡
- Sampha: *Process*. Young Turks TTLP 158‡
- Santana: *Abraxas*. Columbia/Mobile Fidelity MFSL45UD1S-001 (45rpm)
- Santana: *Santana*. Columbia/Mobile Fidelity MFSL45UD1S-001 (45rpm, 2LP, One-Step)
- Seals & Crofts: *Greatest Hits*. Warner Bros. BS-2886
- DJ Shadow: *Endtroducing*. Island/Mercury 4795720‡
- Shakti: *Natural Elements*. Columbia/Speakers Corner JC 34980‡
- *The Sheffield Drum Record*. Sheffield Lab-14*
- Sherwood & Pinch: *Man vs. Sofa*. On-U Sound ONULP 135‡
- The Shins: *Wincing the Night Away*. Sub Pop Records SP 705
- Wayne Shorter: *Emanon*. Blue Note B002776802 3‡
- Horace Silver Quintet: *The Cape Verdean Blues*. Blue Note/Music Matters BNLP4220-45 (45rpm)‡
- Ana Silvera: *Oracles*. Gearbox GB1548‡
- Paul Simon: *Graceland*. Sony 8869191472‡

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- Paul Simon: *Hearts and Bones*. Warner Bros. Records 9 23942-1‡
- Paul Simon: *Songs from* The Capeman. Warner Bros. Records 1-46814
- Paul Simon: *There Goes Rhymin' Simon*. Mobile Fidelity (Lmt Ed UltraDisc, 45rpm, 2LP, One-Step)‡
- Simon and Garfunkel: *Bridge Over Troubled Water*. Columbia/Mobile Fidelity MFSL45UD1S-004 (45rpm, 2LP)
- Simon and Garfunkel: *The Concert in Central Park*. Columbia 49741‡
- Nina Simone: *Little Girl Blue*. Analogue Productions AAPJ 083-45 (45rpm)‡
- Frank Sinatra: *Come Fly With Me*. Capitol CAP-61494‡
- Frank Sinatra: *In the Wee Small Hours*. Capitol CAPLP76157 (mono)‡
- Frank Sinatra: *Only the Lonely*. Capitol/Mobile Fidelity MFSL 1-326 (mono)*
- Frank Sinatra: *Sinatra at the Sands*. Reprise/Mobile Fidelity MFSL 2-332*
- Frank Sinatra: *Sing and Dance with Frank Sinatra*. Impex 6036 (mono, 180g)‡+
- Frank Sinatra: *Songs for Swingin' Lovers*. Capitol CAPLP62862 (mono)‡
- Frank Sinatra: *Where Are You?* Capitol/Mobile Fidelity 406 (mono)
- Jimmy Smith: *Home Cookin'*. Blue Note UNILP29304 (180g)‡
- Jimmy Smith: *Midnight Special*. Blue Note/Analogue Productions 84078‡
- Jimmy Smith: *Prayer Meetin'*. Blue Note 88113 (180g)‡
- *Smoke & Mirrors Percussion Ensemble*. Yarlung YARLP2552-45 (45rpm)‡
- *Sophisticated Lady Jazz Quartet*/Wicks, Boyle, et al. Yarlung YAR09272-004V1‡
- **Davy Spillane: *Atlantic Bridge*. Tara TARA 3019†**
- Simon Spillett: *Square One*. Gearbox Records GB1512
- Dusty Springfield: *Dusty in Memphis*. Atlantic/Analogue Productions 8214-45 (45rpm)‡
- **Bruce Springsteen: *The Ghost of Tom Joad*. Columbia C 67484†**
- Bruce Springsteen: *Western Stars*. Columbia 19075937511‡
- Lyn Stanley: *Interludes*. A.T. Music LLC 3104 (45rpm)‡
- Lyn Stanley: *London Calling—A Toast to Julie London*. AT Music LLC-3107‡
- Lyn Stanley: *The Moonlight Sessions (Volumes One & Two)*. A.T. Music 3105/3106 (45rpm)‡
- Lyn Stanley And Her Jazz Mavericks: *London with a Twist: Live At Bernie's*. A.T. Music ATM3108-45A (180g, 45rpm, 2LP, D2D)‡
- *Star of Wonder*. Reference Recordings RR-21*‡
- **Steely Dan: *Can't Buy A Thrill*. Analogue Productions AUHQR 0009-45 (45rpm, 200g)†‡**
- **Steely Dan: *Countdown To Ecstasy*. Analogue Productions AUHQR 0009-45 (45rpm, 200g)†‡**
- **Steely Dan: *Gaucho*. Analogue Productions AUHQR 0015-45 (45rpm, 200g)†‡**
- Cat Stevens: *Tea for the Tillerman*. A&M/Analogue Productions 9135 (45rpm)*‡
- Cat Stevens: *Teaser and the Firecat*. Mobile Fidelity MFSL 1-244‡
- *The Strayaway Child*. Song of the Wood 7811
- Taylor Swift: *Speak Now*. Universal UNI-LP4003 (180g, 2LP)‡
- Sylvan Esso: *What Now*. Loma Vista LVR00137‡
- Sylvan Esso: *Free Love*. Loma Vista 1344‡
- Talk: *Spirit of Eden*. Parlophone PCSD 105 74 6977 1
- Cecil Taylor: *Silent Tongues*. Arista/ORG Music ORGM-2119‡
- James Taylor: *Dad Loves His Work*. Columbia/Mobile Fidelity MFSL 1-356‡
- James Taylor: *Greatest Hits*. Mobile Fidelity Sound Labs MFSL45UD1S-031 (One-Step Ultradisc, 180g, 45rpm, 2LP)
- Hans Theesink: *Baby Wants To Boogie*. Blue Groove Records BG-100
- Hans Theessink: *Jedermann Remixed—The Soundtrack*. Blue Groove Records BG 1920‡
- Irma Thomas: *Love Is The Foundation*. Newvelle Records NVN001 (180g)‡
- **Chris Thile: *Lay Songs*. Nonesuch 075597916171†‡**
- Richard Thompson: *Rumor and Sigh*. Mobile Fidelity LMF476‡
- Azu Tiwaline: *Draw Me A Silence*. IOT Records IOT73 (2LP)‡
- Masahiko Togashi: *Rings*. East Wind EW-9001-2
- Charles Tolliver: *Connect*. Gearbox Records GB1561‡
- Allen Touissaint: *American Tunes*. Nonesuch 545656-1‡
- Trentemøller: *The Last Resort*. Poker Flat Recordings PFRLP18‡
- A Tribe Called Quest: *The Low End Theory*. Jive 41418‡
- **Jethro Tull: *Stand Up*. Analogue Productions 145-45 (45rpm, 180g)†‡**
- Joe Turner: *Another Epoch—Stride Piano*. Pablo Records 2310-763
- Uncle Tupelo: *Anodyne*. Sire/Reprise RCV1 45424‡
- Stanley Turrentine: *That's Where It's At*. Blue Note 59201 (180g)‡
- McCoy Tyner: *New York Reunion*. Chesky Jazz LP051‡
- Van Halen: *Women and Children First*. Mobile Fidelity Sound Lab (One-Step Ultradisc, 180g, 45rpm, 2LP)
- Various Artists: *Audiophile Analog Collection Vol. 1*. 2xHD 1143 (180g)‡
- Various Artists: *Audiophile Analog Collection Vol. 2*. 2xHD 1167 (180g)‡
- Various Artists: *DMM-Dubplate Vol. 1*. Stockfisch (Limited edition, single-sided, copper-plated steel disc)‡
- Various Artists: *The Sound of Jazz*. Analogue Productions 111-45 (200g, 45rpm, 2LP)‡
- Various Artists: *The Wonderful Sounds Of Male Vocals*. Analogue Productions 131 (200g, 2LP)‡
- Sarah Vaughan: *Gershwin Live!*/Thomas, LA Phil. CBS 37277
- Sarah Vaughan: *How Long Has This Been Going On*. Pablo Records 2310-821
- Sarah Vaughan: *Sarah Vaughan*. EmArcy (Acoustic Sounds Series) AEMA 41301 (180g, mono)‡
- Stevie Ray Vaughan and Double Trouble: *Couldn't Stand the Weather Numbered Limited Edition*. Epic/Mobile Fidelity MFSLUD1S 2-007(180g, 45rpm, 2LP)‡
- Stevie Ray Vaughan and Double Trouble: *Texas Flood*. Epic/Mobile Fidelity MFSL45UD1S 2-005 (180g, 45rpm, 2LP)‡
- Tom Waits and Crystal Gayle: *One From The Heart*. Mobile Fidelity LMF448‡
- Jennifer Warnes: *Famous Blue Raincoat*. Porch Light/Impex IMP6021‡
- Jennifer Warnes: *The Hunter*. Private/Impex IMP6007 (45rpm)‡
- Jennifer Warnes: *The Well*. Impex IMP6001-45 (45rpm)‡
- Dionne Warwick: *Soulful*. Scepter SPS-573
- Rob Wasserman: *Duets*. Analogue Productions AAPB 118‡
- Muddy Waters: *Folk Singer*. Analogue Productions 1843-45 (45rpm)*‡
- Roger Waters: *Amused to Death*. Columbia Legacy/Analogue Productions 468761‡
- Watkins Family Hour: *Watkins Family Hour*. Thirty Tigers Records‡
- *The Weavers Reunion at Carnegie Hall, Part 2*. Vanguard VSD79161*
- The Weavers: *At Home*. Vanguard VSD-2030
- **Ben Webster: *Soulville*. Verve/Analogue Productions 8274-45 (mono. 45rpm, 180g)†‡**
- Gillian Welch: *The Harrow & The Harvest*. Acony ACNY-1109LP‡
- Gillian Welch: *Soul Journey*. Acony ACNY 0305LP‡
- Michael Weiss: *Soul Journey*. Sinatra Records 2003 (2LP, 150g)‡
- Junior Wells: *Hoodoo Man Blues*. Analogue Productions 034-45 (200g, 45rpm, 2LP)‡
- Tony Joe White: *Homemade Ice Cream*. Warner Bros./Analogue Productions AAP 2708-45 (2LP, 45rpm)‡
- The Who: *Live at Leeds*. Geffen/Polydor 5774830‡
- The Who: *Tommy*. Track Records/Classic Records. 613 013‡
- Wilco: *A Ghost Is Born*. Nonesuch/Rhino 8122764921‡
- Sonny Boy Williamson: *Keep It to Ourselves*. Analogue Productions AAPB 036-45 (45rpm)‡
- Anthony Wilson: *Frogtown*. Goat Hill Recordings GHR 004‡

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SUPER LP LIST

- Amy Winehouse: *Back To Black*. Universal 73412‡+
- Stevie Wonder: *Hotter Than July*. Motown MLT37839‡
- Stevie Wonder: *Talking Book*. Motown/Mobile Fidelity MOFI 1-009
- Tatsuro Yamashita: *For You*. Air Records RAL-8801‡
- Trisha Yearwood: *Let's Be Frank*. Gwendolyn Records 1590‡
- Yes: *Fragile*. Atlantic/Mobile Fidelity MFSL45UD1S-012 (45rpm, 2LP, One-Step)‡
- Thom Yorke: *Anima*. XL 987LP‡
- Neil Young: *Harvest*. Reprise Records MS 2032‡
- Neil Young: *Live at Massey Hall*. Reprise 43328 (180g, 2LP)‡
- John Zorn: *The Receiving Surfaces*. Metalanguage ML-201

SPECIAL MERIT: Singles & EPs

- A-ha: *Take On Me*. British Warner Brothers W-9006
- Greg Allman: *Midnight Rider*, *These Days*. Mercury/Analogue Productions AAPP 123-45-P (45rpm)‡
- Andrew Bird: *Useless Creatures*. Fat Possum Records FP1219-1‡
- David Bowie: *Let's Dance*. EMI-America SQ-17093
- China Crisis: *In a Catholic Style*. British Virgin VS-765112
- Miles Davis: *Ascenseur pour l'échafaud*. SAM 660213‡
- Death Cab For Cutie: *The Georgia E.P.* (Death Cab For Cutie Self-released, pink vinyl)‡
- Frankie Goes to Hollywood: *Relax*. British Virgin/ZTT-1ZZTAS1
- Freeez: *I.O.U.* Streetwise SWRL-2210
- Bill Henderson: *Send in the Clowns*. Classic Records/Jazz Planet 0779-33/45C (45rpm)‡
- Human League: *Don't You Want Me*. British Virgin 466-12B
- Greg Kihn Band: *Jeopardy*. Beserkley 0-67932
- Sofia Kourtesis: *Fresia Magdalena*. Technicolour TCLR0137
- New Order: *Blue Monday*. Qwest Records 20332-0
- Propaganda: *Machinery*. British Virgin/ZTT 12xZ TAS 12
- Lionel Richie: *All Night Long*. Motown 4514-MG
- *Satchmo Plays King Oliver*. Audio Fidelity/Analogue Productions AAPJ 5930-45-P (45rpm)‡
- DJ Shadow: *The Mountain Has Fallen*. Mass Appeal. MSAP0046EP‡
- Sonar: *The Bill Laswell Mix Translations*. 7d Media 7d 1911‡
- Sylvan Esso: *Kick Jump Twist*. Loma Vista 88072 01438 (45rpm)‡
- Jeff Tweedy: *Love Is The King*. dBpm DBPM-005-20-7 (45rpm)‡
- Gerry Woo: *Help Yourself*. Polydor 887-529-1
- Yaz: *Don't Go*. Mute Yaz-001
- Yello: *Lost Again*. Elektra 966790
- Yello & Shirley Bassey: *The Rhythm Divine*. Mercury 888-746-1

SPECIAL MERIT: Film and Broadway Scores

- Badalamenti: *Lost Highway*. Nothing/Polydor 5741133‡
- The Band: *The Last Waltz*. Warner Bros. 3146‡
- The Beatles: *A Hard Day's Night*. Capitol 3782572 (mono)‡
- The Beatles: *Help!* Capitol 3782574 (mono)‡
- Bennett: *Murder on the Orient Express*. Capitol Records ST-11361

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TRI-PLANAR
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VICOUSTIC
VOODOO CABLE
WARWICK ACOUSTICS
WATTGATE
WBT
WIREWORLD CABLE
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XLO

- E. Bernstein: *The Grifters*. Varese Sarabande VS-5290
- L. Bernstein: *West Side Story*. Columbia/Analog Spark OS 2001/79301836801-8 2*‡
- L. Bernstein: Symphonic Suite From *On the Waterfront*. Columbia MS6251
- Bliss: *Things to Come*. EMI ASD-3416*
- Byrne, et al.: *Something Wild*. MCA Records MCA-6194
- Cooder: *Paris, Texas*. Real Gone Music RLGM 05431PMI‡
- Desplat and Mothersbaugh: *Moonrise Kingdom*. ABKCO (45rpm)‡
- Goldsmith: *The Boys from Brazil*. A&M Records SP-4731
- Goldsmith: *Chinatown*. ABC ABDP-848
- Herrmann: *Alfred Hitchcock's North by Northwest*. Soundtrack Factory SF 579421‡
- Herrmann: *Citizen Kane*/Gerhardt, LSO. ORG (180g, 45rpm, 2LP)‡
- Herrmann: *The Fantasy Film World*. Decca PFS-4309
- Herrmann: *The Ghost and Mrs. Muir*. Film-music Collection FMC-4*
- Herrmann: *The Three Worlds of Gulliver*. Decca PFS-4337
- Homrich/Gascoigne: *The Emerald Forest*. Varese Sarabande STV-81244
- Horner: *Glory*. Virgin 1-91329
- Jarre: *The Professionals*. Colgems COSO-5001
- Kander & Ebb: *Chicago [The Miramax Motion Picture Soundtrack]*. Barnes & Noble Exclusive (red vinyl)
- Kern: *Show Boat*/McGlinn, Von Stade, Stratas. EMI
- Mancini: *Hatari!* RCA/Analogue Productions AAPP 2559-45-P (45rpm)‡
- Mancini: *The Pink Panther*. RCA/Analogue Productions LSP-2795-45 (45rpm)‡
- Mayfield: *Superfly*. Curtom/Mobile Fidelity MFSL2-481 (45rpm, 2LP)‡
- Moroder: *Cat People*. Backstreet BSR-6107
- Morricone: *The Mission*. Virgin 90567-1
- Myrow/Seagrave: *Phantasm*. Varese VC-81105
- Nitzsche: *The Hot Spot*. Antilles/Analogue Productions 8755 (45rpm)‡
- *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* Lost Highway 619101‡
- **Porter: *Anything Goes* (LuPone). RCA Victor 7769-1-RC†**
- Prokofiev: *Ivan the Terrible*. EMI SLS-5110
- Rota: *Agatha Christie's Death on the Nile*. Capitol Records SW-11866
- Rota: *The Godfather*. Geffen Records B0022409-01‡
- Rózsa: *Ben Hur*. Decca PFS-4394
- Rózsa: *Quo Vadis*. Decca PFS-4430
- Sondheim: *Pacific Overtures*. RCA ARL-1-1367
- Sondheim: *Sweeney Todd*. RCA CBL2-3379
- **Talking Heads: *Stop Making Sense 2023*. Sire 83283 (180g, 2LP)†‡**
- Tiomkin: *Lost Horizons*. British RCA GL-43445
- Tiomkin: *The Thing*. British RCA RL-42005
- Vangelis: *Antarctica*. Japanese Polydor 2MM-0290
- Various: *The Darjeeling Limited*. ABKCO 0018771830016‡
- Various: *The Flight of the Condor*. BBC Records REB-440
- Various: *Goodfellas*. Atlantic 670.9313
- Various: *Grease*. RSO 2658 125‡
- Various: *Pulp Fiction*. Universal 5345461‡
- Waxman: *Sunset Boulevard: The Music of Franz Waxman*/Gerhardt, LSO. ORG 0147-45 (180g, 45rpm, 2LP)‡
- *John Williams At The Movies*. Reference Mastercuts RR-142 (2LP, 180g)‡
- Winehouse, et al.: *Amy*. Republic 65739 (180g, 2LP)‡
- Zimmer: *Dunkirk*. Music on Vinyl MOVATM171‡ tas

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The Absolute Sound's

Product of the Year Awards

Welcome to *The Absolute Sound*'s 2023 Product of the Year Awards, the most prestigious of our honors. Here we celebrate the very best components we've heard in the previous year. In many categories we've chosen two winners: e.g., one that represents the greatest value for the dollar and another that represents the best we've reviewed regardless of price. We've also selected a Budget Component of the Year to recognize the component we believe offers the biggest bang for the buck. Finally, our Overall Product of the Year honors the product that stand above all others as the most impressive achievement of the past 12 months.

AC Power Product of the Year

AudioQuest Niagara 3000
$3900

Although our category is titled "AC Power Product," AudioQuest calls the products in the Niagara series "Low-Z Power/Noise Dissipation Systems." That name better describes its function—to provide a low-impedance current source to your audio components and dissipate the noise that rides on all AC powerlines. This approach has proven itself in many systems over the years; all the Niagara Series products are exceptional performers. Roughly midway in AudioQuest's Niagara line, the 3000 honored here hits the sweet spot of performance and value. It's a big step up from the Niagara 1200, with two additional octaves of AudioQuest's Level-X differential noise filtering, one more bank of noise-dissipation circuits (for a total of three), and two high-current "Transient Power Correction" outlets that are ideal for amplifiers. These outlets can provide up to 55A peak current in short bursts. In sum, the 3000 delivers much of the performance of AudioQuest's vaunted Niagara 7000 at a much lower price. The 3000 consistently delivers a purer, smoother, more natural, and more realistic sound. The bass is improved in every way—deeper, tighter, and much more dynamic. Kickdrum has greater impact and extension, and bass guitar has more power and punch. The midrange and treble are cleaner—less hard and brittle. The Niagara 3000 also reduces glare in the upper midrange, as well as metallic sound in the treble. Overall, the presentation is more relaxed and organic with a great sense of ease. AC power should be treated as an entire system, which is why the Niagara 3000 works best in conjunction with AudioQuest's power cords (we like the Tornado and Hurricane models). Whatever you want to call AudioQuest's Niagara AC products, we're calling the Niagara 3000 our AC Power Product of the Year. (342)

EPIKORE 11

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The DALI EPIKORE 11 is the continuation of a rich bloodline of high-end DALI loudspeakers. From the DALI 40 SE and MegaLine, to the EUPHONIA, EPICON and our current high-end flagship, the DALI KORE, the EPIKORE 11 celebrates four decades of excellence within loudspeaker design and manufacturing.

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Product of the Year Awards

Accessory of the Year

Audiopraise VanityPRO Multichannel HDMI Extractor
$1899

The availability of discrete multichannel recordings for which "surround sound" production serves the musical ends of a performance has never been greater, and worthy multichannel processors, DACs, and amplifiers can be had at various price points. The fly in the ointment for many critical listeners, however, has been the ubiquitous HDMI interface, which, though a dependable conduit for a video signal, too often introduces a great deal of jitter to the audio stream. The VanityPRO reclocks the audio signal delivered by your HDMI cable, employing the incoming data rate rather than the extremely jittery TMDS clock that HDMI uses to get the data from the source to the DAC. A purchaser orders his preferred version of the VanityPRO which outputs the "extracted" data stream into up to eight channels via AES/EBU or SPDIF (RCA or BNC.) The effect of this engineering legerdemain is seamless tonal continuity throughout the frequency spectrum and more dynamic nuance that better allows for an enhanced spatial presentation—either an attempt to render the natural acoustic of a specific venue or the synthetic intentions of an imaginative pop/rock producer—to register completely. Be advised: The VanityPRO's technology won't work with newer "immersive" codecs such as Dolby Atmos, but multichannel enthusiasts with large collections of PCM or DSD discs and/or files may find the Audiopraise VanityPro to be indispensable. (344)

Cable and Interconnect of the Year

Crystal Cable Reference² Diamond
Interconnect $2000/1m (+$500 per ½ meter) RCA/XLR; speaker $4890/2.5m speaker; PC, $1250/1m

Crystal Cable's Reference² Diamond is as finely wrought and jewel-like as something found at a Tiffany & Co. counter. But don't be fooled by its lithe, opulent looks, as Reference² Diamond steadfastly refuses to be typecast. It conveys a slightly darker, richer, more romantic sound, a bit forward but with an element of roundedness in the midrange that lends music weight and substance. An honest broker across the frequency spectrum, it flatters a good recording but also reveals the letdowns of a poor one. Thus, if a record has an edgy or aggressive top end, the Crystal Cable allows that stridency to play out. The area that left NG almost (but not quite) speechless is its ability to elicit finer and finer gradations of timbral and textural color and contrast. From the opening transient of a bow across a violin or cello string or a flat-pick on the steel strings of a guitar or mandolin, Reference² Diamond seems to capture more of the character of each note. Reference² Diamond hangs on to every breath, syllable, and sustain. It embodies a level of uncolored musicality that brings out the full potential of a system and thus is well deserving of our Cable and Interconnect of the Year Award. (342)

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Product of the Year Awards

Tube Integrated Amplifier of the Year

Icon Audio Stereo 40 MkIV Signature
$5295

The Stereo 40 evolved significantly over the years since its introduction in 2001. The current MkIV iteration was unveiled in 2019 and features improved performance and functionality via the addition of headphone capability. Designer David Shaw loves the sound of the 6SN7 tube and has selected the Psvane CV181 clear-glass type for the front-end cascode gain stage and phase splitter. Elegantly styled and easy to bias, the Stereo 40 actually delivers 55Wpc at clipping from a pair of KT88 beam power tubes. It uses a tried-and-true Ultralinear output stage and is switchable to triode mode via a toggle switch on the front panel. Selectable feedback (0, 6, and 12dB) makes for flexible system integration. Its low noise floor contributes to the exceptional resolution of orchestral harmonic layers. Low-level detail floats to the surface naturally without the help of any gratuitous upper-midrange brightness. It is far more revealing than that great and beloved classic UL amplifier, the Dynaco ST-70, which practically sounds fuzzy by comparison. The Stereo 40 propels the music forward with an excellent boogie factor, refined grain-free textures, and fidelity to tonal colors. The Stereo 40 Signature version (as reviewed) satisfied DO's appetite for glorious tube sound. An attractive confluence of musical attributes catapults it into the elite class of integrated tube amps and to the winner's circle as Tube Integrated Amplifier of the Year. (335)

Solid-State Integrated Amplifier of the Year

Roksan Attessa Streaming Amplifier
$3399

The Roksan Attessa turned out to be a real sleeper. More importantly, the new 80Wpc power output and contemporary functionality embodies where today's marketplace lives. Attessa is Rocksan's first integrated DAC; it includes network streaming capability and a fine moving-magnet phonostage. Sonic performance registers high scores across all genres of music. The Attessa is grain- and edge-free and doesn't shade or spotlight particular frequency bands. It maintains a ripe and natural midrange, a firmly controlled bass, and a smooth if slightly dry top end. It is especially good at imparting dynamic energy in both the macro and micro senses; transient information never grows weak-kneed in the face of large dynamic swings. Throughout, there is an untrammeled clarity to every note. Looks, ergonomics, and performance all fall into place for this Solid-State Integrated Amplifier of the Year. (335)

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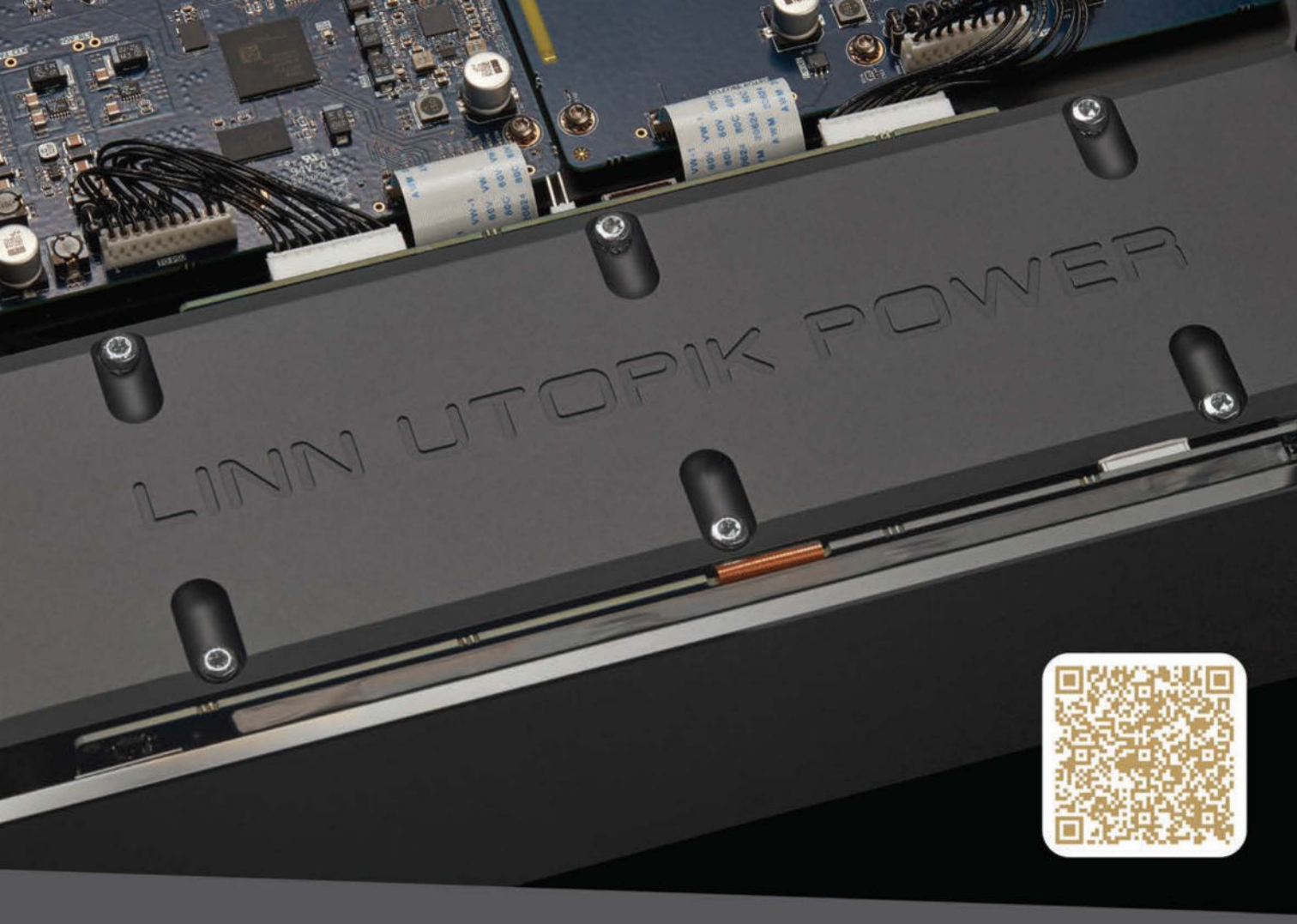

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Ontario Toronto
Star Electronics

Ontario Whitby
Audio by Mark Jones

Product of the Year Awards

Solid-State Preamplifier of the Year

Soulution 727

$74,975 (optional mm/mc phono card $11,975)

This amazingly improved ("amazingly" because its predecessor, the 725, was so good) third-generation linestage preamplifier from the ultra-high-end Swiss company Soulution was completely redesigned over an eight-year development period, coming to market in 2023 with a new input stage, a newly improved volume control, a new power supply, and a new output stage that boasts a bandwidth of 20MHz! The key design goal of all these changes was to reduce noise and phase shift (which are now claimed to be unmeasurably low). Sonically, the aim was (in the words of chief designer and CEO Cyrill Hammer) "higher resolution and more likelike musicality." Of course, almost everyone in the audio biz makes such claims about his newest component; moreover, it has been JV's experience that record-low distortion and super-high resolution do not necessarily (or often) translate into "higher musicality." Here, for once, they do. The Soulution 727 is the most "complete" and lifelike-sounding preamplifier that JV has heard (and he's heard them all)—a model of gorgeous tone color, tremendous bass, sledgehammer dynamic weight, three-dimensional imaging, sensational soundstaging, and, yes, detail that sets a new standard of resolution without sounding the least bit analytical. A landmark achievement from a company that has long set the bar for technical innovation and highest fidelity, JV's new reference, and TAS' 2023 Solid-State Preamp of the Year. (Reviewed this issue)

Solid-State Power Amplifier of the Year

Krell KSA-i400

$36,500

The Krell KSA-i400 packs 400Wpc into 8 ohms or a whopping 800Wpc into 4 ohms. Yet the truly amazing part is that it achieves these specifications while operating completely in Class A and not reaching temperatures that would melt steel. Krell's patent-pending iBias technology, XD low-output impedance control, and Symmetry Maximization are the reasons for its success. When Krell opined that XD improves musical dynamics, depth, and dimensionality, reviewer Matt Clott could not disagree. But Krell should have added that the KSA-i400 also lowers the noise floor, improves bass impact, and adds dynamic texture. Symmetry Maximization reduces second-order harmonic distortion, dramatically opening up the soundstage with improved detail and a better sense of pace, which results in a more realistic listening experience. Krell claims that massive current reserves in the power supply and use of direct-coupled, differential, current-mode circuitry provides unrestricted power with effortless reproduction of the entire audio band, and MC has to unhesitatingly agree. He lost hours on this review, just listening. Quite frankly, this was the best (insert inappropriate explicative) Krell amplifier he has ever heard. And not by a little bit. Anything he has ever criticized about Krell was gone. Anything he wanted but was previously lacking was now there. Was it the best amplifier he has ever heard? No. But to get truly better will take moving up to equipment 2–3 times its price, and that means serious *dinero*! Solid-State Power Amplifier of the Year without question. (339)

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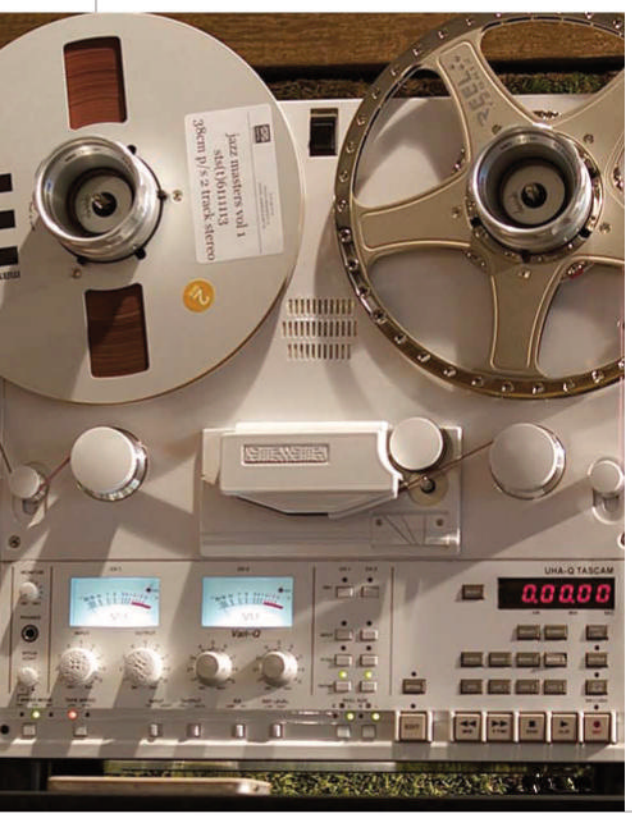
Tube Power Amplifier of the Year

McIntosh MC451

$28,000/pr.

McIntosh's new MC451 is something new—a stereo tube amplifier and a stereo solid-state amplifier in one chassis. The MC451 is designed for bi-amping—a tube amp for the midrange and highs and a solid-state amplifier for the lows and lower midrange. The idea is to get the best of tube sound while also exploiting the best of solid-state. Most past efforts to get the best out of both tube and transistor technology used a high-level input to drive a tube preamp that then drove a solid-state power amplifier or a separate crossover connected to two separate amplifiers. The MC451 uses a single input and tube gain stage to drive a crossover to a separate 150-watt tube power amp for the midrange and treble and to a 300-watt solid-state amp for the bass and lower midrange—both on the same chassis. AHC has heard enough systems and recordings to know that the midrange and treble nuances provided by the MC451 will improve the musicality of a substantial number of high-end rigs and suit the personal taste of a wide range of audiophiles. (341)

Product of the Year Awards



Reel-to-Reel Tape Machine of the Year

United Home Audio Ultima5 OPS-DC

$34,500, ($41,000 with OPS-DC outboard DC power supply)

While current analog technology (particularly DS Audio's near-massless Grand Master Extreme optical cartridge and ES-001 centering device) has brought LP playback considerably closer to the sound of tape, there is still a gap, which the latest iteration of Greg Beron's Ultima Series tape decks, the Ultima5 OPS-DC, consistently reveals and exploits. Of course, much depends on the quality of the tape transfer. But, at their best (or even a little bit short of their best), 15ips reel-to-reel tapes can be astonishingly realistic sounding, provided that the tape deck is also first rate. The United Home Audio Ultima5 with OPS-DC power supply is precisely that—first rate. With parts and circuitry derived from Greg's $90k SuperDeck, the Ultima 5 is more neutral in balance with better reach and dynamic impact in the bottom octaves, a wider, deeper soundstage, tighter imaging, higher resolution, and fuller, more accurate, natural, and continuous reproduction of the dynamic/harmonic envelope than previous Ultimas. If you're in the market for a great, full-sized, playback-only, 15ips tape deck (and don't want to bet the farm on a no-holds-barred UHA SuperDeck), the Ultima5 OPS-DC would unquestionably be the unit JV recommends and is unquestionably worthy of TAS' Reel-to-Reel Tape Machine of the Year Award. (338)

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Product of the Year Awards

DAC of the Year

dCS Bartók APEX

$20,950 ($22,950 with Class A headphone amp); APEX upgrade, $9000

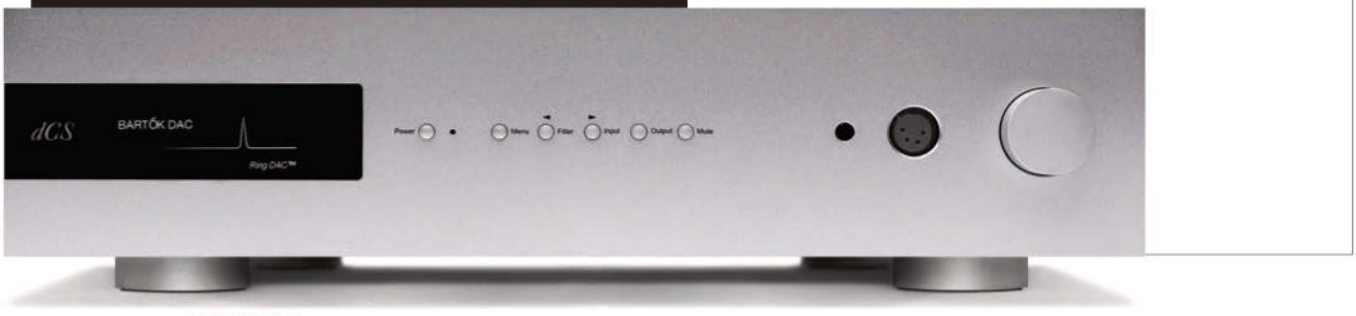
Improve the dCS Bartók? NG was skeptical. And then dCS went ahead and did it, with a collection of sophisticated advancements known as APEX. Let's back up for a minute and recollect that the original Bartók (dCS' entry-level network-streaming DAC) was the replacement for the vaunted Debussy DAC. It sported the latest dCS digital-processing platform and Ring DAC technology originally developed for the Rossini series. Capabilities included streaming over Ethernet from a NAS drive, online music services such as Tidal, as well as full MQA decoding and rendering, plus a much-improved interface and app. The Bartók APEX, however, does the unthinkable: It furthers what Bartók began and then surpasses it. As before, it accomplishes for digital playback what was once the exclusive province of analog playback, establishing the same visceral and addictive connection that enthusiasts have with their LPs. It remains as tonally accurate as an atomic clock, but its voice has opened further, exhibiting greater bloom and wider micro/macro-dynamic swings. Listening to it is like witnessing a recording from inside the microphone capsule; music is fully expressed from opening transient to the last gasp of acoustic decay, calling to mind the finest vinyl playback. The APEX is not inexpensive, but the sonic improvements are a triumph of naturalism that will floor even the most jaded audio listeners. The very definition of what a Product of the Year is all about. (300, 344)

DAC/Preamplifier of the Year

TIDAL Audio Contros Digital Music Controller

$60,000

Tidal Audio's Contros is a no-compromise digital controller and streamer that goes to some pretty remarkable lengths to remain sonically invisible. There are three digital inputs—coaxial, optical, and AES/EBU—in addition to the manufacturer's proprietary Tidal Link and two USB inputs for attaching storage devices. Three pairs of line-level outputs are provided, two balanced and one single-ended. A streaming module is ready for Tidal (the other one), Qobuz, Apple AirPlay, and other services, once the user has downloaded one of several recommended network players to the iOS device. The Contros' volume control is highly sophisticated, hermetically sealed switched-resistor network that has the feel and operation of a continuous analog volume control. The DAC is a discrete 32-bit device that eschews traditional oversampling, instead implementing Tidal's own variety of data interpolation called ASRT² (Analog Signal Remediation Technology) to smooth out a lower-sampling-rate waveform. There are numerous local power supplies and very little in the way of internal wiring. The result is an exceptional transparency to the source that assures that every bit of tonal, dynamic, and spatial detail present in a recording gets through to the power amplifier(s) without editorialization. It's about as close to the proverbial "straight wire with gain" as you can get and a clear choice for TAS' DAC/Preamp of the Year. (Reviewed this issue)



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Product of the Year Awards

Disc Player of the Year

Kalista DreamPlay XC

$68,800 (optional Silent Base $8700)

The high-end French audio company Kalista markets the DreamPlay XC as a "universal digital source," and given that it combines four devices (CD/SACD player, streamer, DAC, and digital preamp with Leedh volume control) in one gorgeous, touchscreen-equipped chassis, cleverly suspended on an optional anti-vibration base and powered by a large outboard supply, it kinda is. Beyond its remarkable versatility, what makes the DreamPlay so special is its sound, which, to JV's ear, is highly reminiscent of that of the superb Soulution 760 DAC, which is to say the DreamPlay has an analog-like liquidity, density of timbre, and three-dimensionality rarely found in digital playback components. Of course, it also offers the resolution, dynamics, and bass that we rightly associate with ones and zeroes, but it offers them without any of the thinning down or whiting out of body and timbre or the etching of transients that we (or some of us) also associate with digital sources. Played back on its built-in CD/SACD player, physical discs are particularly natural sounding. Indeed, with CDs and SACDs the DreamPlay XC sets a new standard for analog-like musicality in digital replay. As a disc player, this is a world-class unit that JV (not one of digital audio's most ardent fans) could happily live with until the cows come home from wherever they go when they're out and about. It is also TAS' 2023 Disc Player of the Year. (344)

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Turntables of the Year

Basis Bravo Turntable & Vector Tonearm

$13,700 with Bravo Vector (as reviewed), $16,000 with Vector 4

It's a pleasure to report that the legacy of the late Basis founder A.J. Conti lives on. Considering that A.J. *was* Basis Audio, after his untimely death the future was never certain. His widow Jolanta not only had to manage the family business, while grieving for her spouse and raising two kids; she also had to find a mechanical engineer able to meet her late husband's exacting standards. After several years with Basis, Alex Bourque was named the man, and the Basis Bravo Turntable and Vector Tonearm are the first fruits of his efforts. Of course, Bourque had an extraordinary foundation to build on. The goal for this entry-level design was to bring the company's performance and build-quality to a wider audience in a smaller package with a simpler set-up procedure. Although the platter, motor, and bearing are identical to those of the Model 2200, the Bravo foregoes Basis' Resonance Annihilator suspension system for an unsuspended subchassis with solid feet and rubber isolators. The Bravo Vector arm is a slightly stripped-down version of the Vector 4, but in practice the two sound notably alike. Sonically, the Bravo/Vector is a Basis design through and through—exceptionally quiet, with great resolution, dynamic expression, and that signature "lack of sound" that Basis is known for. Jolanta Conti and Bourque had an enormous task making sure the Bravo maintained the company's standards. They've succeeded beautifully enough to win one of TAS' Turntable of the Year Awards. (341)

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Turntables of the Year

Acoustic Signature Invictus Neo

$199,995

The Acoustic Signature Neo turntable is, as its name says ("Neo" is ancient Greek for "new"), genuinely new—and magically improved. Why magically? Because after living for almost a decade with its predecessors, the Invictus and the Invictus, Jr., JV wouldn't have thought such a major advancement in LP playback was possible. After all, the original Invictus and its young heir the Invictus Jr. were the best turntables he'd heretofore had in-house. The Invictus was massive, of course, and that hasn't changed. And it was ultra-expensive and is now considerably more so. But it was also the quietest record player he'd heard. Well, here we are, eight years down the road, and Acoustic Signature's Neo has astounded JV all over again. You not only hear considerably more of everything that matters through the Neo; you also hear considerably less of everything that doesn't. The RFI, the EMI, the jittery mechanical noises of all those moving parts grinding against one another—which, among other things, tend to flatten body, smear tone color (particularly in the bass), blur detail (ditto), and, with their added emphases on starting transients, make dynamic changes sound sharp and "step-like" rather than smooth and ramp-like—simply aren't there anymore. Even though the original Invicti strongly reminded JV of 15ips tape playback, the Neos come so much closer to that paragon of smooth, solid, continuous, organic high fidelity that it's amazing. The Invictus Neo is a paragon of analog sonic excellence and an easy choice for TAS' Turntable of the Year. (339)

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Tonearms of the Year

Acoustic Signature TA-9000 Neo
$27,995

An ingeniously designed and elaborately constructed aluminum tonearm with a near-friction-free space-age bearing and a unique, branch-like internal structure (made via an expensive and time-intensive SLM process) that provides superior damping without adding excess mass, the TA-9000 Neo (now equipped with even better Timken ball bearings and other nifty improvements) is the most transparent and easily adjusted pivoted tonearm JV has used or reviewed. Imperturbable tracking, exceptional neutrality, unexcelled resolution (in a non-linear-tracking tonearm), and superb dynamics make this marvel of German engineering a must-audition for any LP lover with pockets deep enough to afford it. They also make the TA-9000 one of TAS' Tonearms of the Year. (339)

Product of the Year Awards

Tonearms of the Year

Kuzma Safir 9
$22,000

Safir 9 represents the full expression to date of Franc Kuzma's unique 4 Point tonearm design. An extremely rigid and stiff, high-mass, lab-grown-sapphire tube replaces the aluminum one found on other 4 Points, though of course that's not the only difference. Mr. Kuzma claims "the arm is resonance-free to 5kHz." Low-frequency clarity, extension, and weight seem to confirm the assertion, making many other arms sound soft and disorganized on the bottom. The "quad unipivot" design features four hardened, super-sharp points sitting in concave jeweled sapphire cups—a pair each for vertical and horizontal movement. The 9" Safir places the quad points within a high-mass solid-aluminum-and-brass structure that also holds the sapphire arm tube. High mass keeps the points "glued" to the cups but able to precisely roll as necessary within them, eliminated bearing "chatter." The arm's 60-gram effective mass makes it suitable for low-to-mid-compliance cartridges but not high-compliance ones. Its 1250-gram *total* mass also makes it unusable on sprung-chassis turntables. VTA/SRA "on the fly" isn't possible, though it's easily and precisely settable when the arm is at rest. Unlike most other Kuzma arms, the Safir 9's headshell is fixed so you can't easily swap out cartridges. Those limitations will only sound problematic until you hear what this arm can do! The Safir 9 has been referred to as "the poor man's SAT." Since no poor person can afford to spend $22,000 on a tonearm, let's just say that buying the Safir 9 instead of either SAT will leave you tens of thousands of dollars richer though sonically somewhat poorer. The musical difference isn't significant enough to prevent the Kuzma Safir 9 from earning one of TAS' Tonearm of the Year Awards. (338)

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Product of the Year Awards

Phonostages of the Year

PrimaLuna EVO 100

$3695

PrimaLuna's first standalone phonostage accepts both mm and low-output mc cartridges. Rather than use the conventional mc solution of either a step-up transformer or a solid-state input stage for generating an additional 20dB or so of gain for moving-coil cartridges, PrimaLuna opted for a 6922 dual-triode gain stage connected as a grounded grid circuit. Combined with the 40dB of gain generated by the mm stage, the total gain is 60dB—more than enough to satisfy any moving coil. It's an absolutely fabulous tube extravaganza. Not only are both gain stages tube based; they also add tube rectification and tube regulation via a pair of EL34 pentodes, giving you a unique circuit. The EVO 100 uses active inverse RIAA EQ based on feedback loops, emulating such classics as the Marantz 7 and Audio Research SP3a. System integration is super easy via front-panel, selectable mc input-impedance settings. For those of us addicted to tube sound, the EVO 100 is a godsend. It serves up a luscious midrange without losing sight of detail resolution, as well as image focus and 3D soundstaging—tube gear's traditional strengths. This superlative phonostage elevates the vinyl playback experience to new heights. It has magnified DO's enjoyment level to the point where he just can't stop spinning vinyl. Truly a sonic masterpiece and one of 2023's Tube Phonostages of the Year!

Phonostages of the Year

CH Precision P10

$76,000

Much to the surprise of CH Precision's engineering team, what began as an exercise in lowering the older P1 phonostage's already low noise floor concluded with a new P10 that both measures and sounds substantially better than what was already one of the world's most accomplished non-sounding phono preamps. The 6dB improvement from -135dBu to -144dBu, produced in part by moving the power supply into an outboard chassis, delivered the expected sonic benefit of being able to hear further and more clearly into the soundstage, but it inexplicably also delivered improved bass extension and low-frequency macrodynamic articulation—something referred to in the real world as "better bass." Midband transparency is also notably improved, as is image three-dimensionality and solidity. Though the P10's exterior appears similar if not identical to the P1's, the ultra-short signal path circuitry inside is all-new, and updated features abound. The second voltage-based input is new for a total of two current and two voltage inputs. The remote control is new, as are some of the features you can select with it including "mono," absolute polarity inversion, and a choice of global or local feedback. The P10 improves upon the P1's already exceptional gain and loading flexibility (for voltage-amplification inputs) and ups the unique test-record-based "set-up wizard" experience. Feature- and convenience-rich, with sophisticated sonic performance you'll recognize at first listen, it is an easy choice for one of TAS' Phonostage of the Year Awards. (344)

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Product of the Year Awards

Phono Cartridges of the Year

Hana Umami Blue

$2500

Excel Sound Corporation's Masao Okada-san has been building OEM cartridges for decades. Several years ago, Excel started designing its own cartridges, the flagship being the Umami Red—a gorgeous-sounding mc with an ever-so-slight hint of warmth to go with exceptionally balanced coverage of the frequency spectrum. The Hana Umami Blue is the latest addition to Okada-san's lineup. The cartridge has a glossy blue finish that gives off a bit of brilliance to the eye. The solid-boron cantilever, nude microline stylus, and the cryogenic treatment (front and rear yokes, pole piece, and 24-karat gold-plated terminals) are all shared with the Umami Red. Sonically, the Blue has a more illuminated character than the slightly warmer-sounding members of the Hana family. It moves even closer to neutral without running anywhere near the cool side. The Blue traces the groove easily on more dynamic and complex passages and has what reviewer Andre Jennings considered superb micro- and macro-dynamics that comfortably compete with cartridges at any price point. The Blue also adds a surprising level of transparency to the music embedded in the grooves, preserving harmonic content and speedy note transitions with uncanny ease. With the Blue, Hana has set another baseline of performance-for-cost, even against competitors into the upper four-digit range. A sonic winner and one of TAS' 2023 Phono Cartridges of the Year.

Phono Cartridges of the Year

DS Audio Grand Master

$15,000, cartridge/$45,000, two-box equalizer

The DS Audio Grand Master optical transducer comes closer to the sound of R2R tape than any other phono cartridge (except for the yet-to-be-reviewed Grand Master EX). Yes, it is expensive, though you don't have to buy the dedicated Grand Master EQ units to get your sonic money's worth. (Any DS Audio EQ device will work with it—and there is a wide variety of them at a wide variety of price points, starting below $2k.) Unlike every other phono cartridge and phonostage on the market, the Grand Master and its EQ units are dead quiet—without a trace of the hum, buzz, RF, and self-noise that analog lovers have simply learned to live with. The elimination of the usual background racket, coupled to an optical system's deeper and fuller presentation of the bass and lower midrange, rich supremely detailed midband, and sweet, airy, ribbon-like treble, makes for the most "complete" and (given a great LP) most realistic reproduction of the music and musicians on LPs JV has yet heard (the EX excepted). A Grand Masterpiece that well deserves TAS' 2023 Cartridge of the Year Award. (316)

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Product of the Year Awards

Integrated System of the Year

KEF LSX II
$1399

The KEF LSX II represents the perfect on-ramp for a budding audiophile: flexible without being overly complicated, easy to set up and start streaming through, attractive enough to fit into almost any room, and, above all else, great sounding. It's incredible how much heft and weight comes out of these reasonably sized speakers. They're cloth-wrapped, truly wireless, and pack a shockingly large punch into their tight bodies. They come with several different physical connections including optical, USB-C, AUX, HDMI ARC, along with the typical streaming options like Bluetooth, Wi-Fi, AirPlay 2, and Chromecast. The phone app can control most settings, and the LSX II decodes DSD and MQA natively. These are supremely adaptable all-in-one speakers, which means they can be tweaked to work in nearly any environment, all while featuring their energetic, exciting midrange and that surprisingly solid low end. These are the kind of speakers that could keep any party going late into the night, then let you get up the next morning to play some lovely classical and jazz. KEF's vaunted UniQ driver produces a neutral but extremely engaging sound, one that works between different genres and moods. Attractive, competent, truly wireless, and equipped with a few very nice upgrades over their predecessor, the KEF LSX II is the easy winner of TAS' 2023 Integrated System of the Year Award. (335)

Stand-Mounted Loudspeaker of the Year

Harbeth Monitor M40.3 XD
$22,500

The latest version of Harbeth's flagship, the large three-way M40.3 XD, benefits from the designer Alan Shaw's "eX-tended Definition" upgrades. These consist mostly in substantial improvements in cone material—bass and midrange drivers now made from RADIAL 2, the company's proprietary compound known for its lightness, rigidity, and extremely low coloration—and crossovers, which further refine the integration of all three drivers for improved coherence and transparency. Using the Omni-Mic system, TAS reviewer Paul Seydor got one of the flattest, smoothest, most linear in-room responses he's ever measured (almost textbook), making the M40.3 XD one of the rare loudspeakers capable of reproducing a symphony orchestra top to bottom with an absolutely truthful tonal balance that never sacrifices vividness, vitality, involvement, color, body, texture, resolution, and palpable presence, not to mention that storied Harbeth drop-dead gorgeous midrange. This means that it will also reproduce virtually any other kind of music with comparable fidelity while eliminating listening fatigue. Bass has sufficient reach and slam that you can do without a subwoofer on virtually every kind of acoustic music. Now, all around, the best large three-way speaker in PS' considerable experience, the Harbeth M40.3 XDs are also TAS' 2023 Stand-Mounted Loudspeakers of the Year. (342)

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Product of the Year Awards

Affordable Loudspeaker of the Year

MoFi Electronics SourcePoint 10
$3999 (stands $499)

This Andrew Jones design is based on a new concentric driver housed in a 50-liter bass-reflex cabinet capable of 40Hz bass extension. A 10" paper pulp woofer transitions cleanly to a 1.25" silk dome tweeter at a frequency of 1.6kHz. The SP 10 is capable of delivering sweet harmonic textures with consummate lucidity and transparency, along with a superlative boogie factor. There is plenty of low-level detail that seems to bubble effortlessly to the surface within the confines of a nicely layered depth perspective. The SP 10 is capable of virtually lighting a fire under the soundstage, delivering dynamic peaks with no apparent compression and successfully connecting the listener with the music's passion and drama. This is not a bright speaker, but the extreme treble range is tipped up, adding a touch of air to the soundstage—an effect which is felicitous of female voice and violin overtones. It is possible to effectively reduce the treble response at the listening seat by toeing the speakers in. One of the SP 10's most remarkable attributes is a sense of coherence, much like that of a full-range driver. Space truly is the final frontier, and the SP 10's spatial solidity is bound to win many fans. Without a doubt, the SP 10 makes a major statement in the under-$10k speaker category and breathes new life into the concentric-loudspeaker genre, which is why it is TAS' Affordable Loudspeaker of the Year. (338)

Mid-Priced Loudspeaker of the Year

Audiovector QR 7
$6500

Audiovector has identified 20 "golden rules" for loudspeaker design, all of which are met in the company's top R Series products. For the entry-level QR line—the three-way, four-driver QR 7 is the largest—compromises were inevitable, but the Danish manufacturer has managed to satisfy half of those key design parameters with features that include asymmetric internal cabinet geometry, a version of the manufacturer's nonpareil AMT tweeter, sandwich membranes for the woofer and midrange drivers, and 7-nines copper wiring. The enclosures are sourced from a different supplier, and, while solidly constructed, they are not as elegantly contoured as the pricier R Arreté models. As there's just a single pair of high-quality binding posts around back, biwiring or biamping is off the table. Audiovector has saved money—perhaps *your* money—with some very strategic design and manufacturing choices to produce a transducer that's comfortable with pretty much any musical genre, from electric blues to string quartets, from Romantic organ spectaculars to contemporary choral music. In the universe of eye-poppingly expensive elite loudspeakers, many consider the Danish company's reference R Series speakers to be good values. Especially given that perspective, the QR 7's price-to-performance ratio has to be considered extraordinary. (335)

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Product of the Year Awards

High-End Loudspeakers of the Year

Dynaudio Confidence 50

$33,500

Dynaudio has been building its Confidence line of loudspeakers for over 30 years. The latest offerings include four models, of which the floorstanding Confidence 50 is the second largest. For listeners who want their music to scale up convincingly but must deploy an audio system in a typical moderately sized domestic space, these speakers should be under strong consideration. By any standard, the Confidence 50 is a big loudspeaker, 59½" tall and close to 110 pounds—a three-way, five-driver design with bass extension down to 35Hz -3dB. That the Confidence 50s don't tend to overload real-world spaces has a lot to do with the loudspeaker's DDC (Dynaudio Directivity Control) Lens, which, attached to the front baffle, greatly mitigates floor and ceiling bounce. A downward-firing bass port helps, as well. The driver complement includes the latest iteration of Dynaudio's Esotar soft dome tweeter—located centrally in the loudspeaker's vertical axis— plus pairs of 6" midrange cones and 7" woofers above and below, all of which utilize the company's proprietary Magnesium Silicate Polymer membrane material. The Confidence 50s impress as much with smaller scale music as with Mahler and Metallica. Subtleties in phrasing and dynamic inflections by a string quartet or shifts in tone color by a jazz vocalist register effortlessly. A great transducer and one of this year's TAS High-End Loudspeakers of the Year. (338, 341)

High-End Loudspeakers of the Year

Wilson Audio Alexia V

$67,500

At the mid-point of the Wilson line, the new Alexia V imports many of the materials, drivers, and technologies from Wilson's $349,000 Chronosonic XVX, housing them in a smaller cabinet at a price one-fifth that of its big brother. The Alexia V is a three-way system with 10" and 8" woofers, the same Quad-Mag 7" midrange driver first used in the Chronosonic XVX, and the same Wilson Convergent Synergy Carbon tweeter developed for the $135k Alexx V. The Alexia V benefits from more than 30 areas of improvement over its predecessor, the Alexia Series 2. Sonically, the Alexia V has many of the virtues of the XVX. Chief among these is the Alexia V's spectacular bass performance. In the low end, the Alexia V strikes the perfect balance, delivering powerful weight and muscularity yet never sounding thick or overblown. Although not as refined as that of the XVX, the Alexia V's midrange shares the harmonic beauty and warmth that are some of the Chronosonic's defining features. This smoothness and ease extend to an upper octave that resolves real musical information without a metallic edge. Finally, every detail of the Alexia V's design and build exudes the highest level of quality and craftsmanship. The execution is simply beyond reproach. A beautiful and compelling package, the Alexia V can be considered a bargain when compared with some six-figure models. For all these reasons, the Wilson Audio Alexia V was an easy choice for one of our High-End Loudspeaker of the Year Awards. (342)

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Product of the Year Awards

Ultra-High-End Loudspeaker of the Year

Rockport Orion
$133,000

Rockport's Orion is an entirely new speaker, designed from the ground up as the company's penultimate model. The three-year development effort required all new drivers that comprise a 13" woofer, 7" midrange, and 1.2" dome tweeter mounted in a waveguide. The Orion's ultra-dense enclosure is made from a cast-aluminum inner enclosure and a carbon-fiber shell, with the space between them filled with a dense epoxy. The swept-back look is classic Rockport. The Orion excels in those areas that matter most in creating musical realism—timbral accuracy, top-to-bottom coherence, and dynamics. It's this last quality where the Orion most distinguishes itself from the competition, reproducing music's transient nature with a lifelike immediacy that is immensely rewarding. The Orion's transient "snap" infuses music with a sense of lifelike realism that few other speakers realize—at any price. The Orion also projects a sense of clarity, resolution, alacrity, and vibrant immediacy. Though some speakers have these same qualities, they don't engage the listener musically the way that Orion does. The difference is that although the Orion has pristine clarity and very high resolution of detail, it doesn't sound forward, aggressive, or analytical. Rather, the Orion is utterly liquid and warm in timbre, with no hint of etch or metallic hardness. Technically innovative, beautifully built, and musically communicative, the Rockport Orion is our choice for Ultra-High-End Loudspeaker of the Year. (338)

Cost-No-Object Loudspeaker of the Year

Focal Stella Utopia Evo
$149,998

The Stella Utopia EM Evo features an electro-magnetic woofer (or high-efficiency field coil) and the OPC+ multi-adjustment sound-personalization system in a three-way design smaller than the flagship four-way Grande Utopia. The Stella has a single 13.0" electro-magnetic woofer, a 1" beryllium inverted-dome tweeter, and dual 6.5" midrange drivers. The Stella's OPC+ filter and EM woofer power-supply adjustments offer a total of 243 setting combinations that allow the user to tailor the sound to his personal preference and to integrate the speaker into his room. Once set up and adjusted, the Stella Utopia EM Evo delivers an uncanny transparency reminiscent of electrostatic loudspeakers, but with frequency extremes to balance the sound and bring things into more complete perspective. The Stella displays lightning-fast rhythm and pacing while maintaining bass performance that is tight, controlled, and realistic sounding. The soundscape and imaging are excellent with exceptionally good image height for such a large speaker, seemingly near-unlimited dynamic playback capability, and great instrumental separation. A shoo-in for this year's Cost-No-Object Loudspeaker of the Year Award. (338)

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Product of the Year Awards

Subwoofers of the Year

GoldenEar ForceField 30

$900

Searching for a POY honoree that beats the competition on price like it does on performance? Look no further than the ForceField 30. It brings the build and sonics of GoldenEar's own elite SuperSub Series to the sub-$1k market. Driven by 1000W switching amp, its forward-firing 8" long-throw driver is enhanced by a downward-firing passive radiator. The combo goes about its work nearly invisibly and has astonishingly good extension, dropping into the upper twenty-cycle range with conviction and little in the way of overhang artifacts or "slowness." Dynamic impacts exit as cleanly as they enter—a tribute to the effective and controlled tuning of the passive radiator. Beyond providing a visceral impression of deep-bass response, the FF30 also helps complete the ambient landscape, restoring scale and reverberant air by opening up pathways for the venue's acoustic signature. A serious (and affordable) musical achievement, not to mention a flat-out blast, it is one of TAS' 2023 Subwoofers of the Year. (335)

Subwoofers of the Year

JL Audio Fathom f110

$4000

We've long been fans of JL Audio's spectacular Fathom f112 and f113 subwoofers. Now, the company has introduced the f110, a smaller, less expensive sub that brings JL's technology and performance to a lower price and smaller size. The model number designates the woofer size (10" in the f110), with the smaller woofer supplied with less amplifier power (1100W). The folks at JL design and build their own drivers and have been issued more than 50 patents for loudspeaker, amplifier, and signal-processing technologies. We especially like their Digital Automatic Room Optimization (DARO) system, a room-correction technology with an 18-band digital equalizer that surgically removes response peaks and dips. Once eq'd, the f110 delivers deep solid bass without the thickness, overhang, and bloat that plague other subs. And unlike many competitors, the f110 combines this powerful muscularity with superb transient response, excellent pitch definition, and high resolution. Consequently, it's much easier to integrate the f110 with the main speakers. Previous Fathom models have consistently won Product of the Year Awards, and we're happy to add this new Fathom to that esteemed pedigree. (Reviewed this issue)

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Budget Product of the Year

Pro-Ject T1 Phono SB Turntable

$449

The Pro-Ject T1 Phono SB is a fantastic entry-level turntable with the sort of features that could hook any new-to-vinyl listener. It has a square base made of solid MDF with absolutely no plastic involved, and its belt-drive system includes a glass platter and a precision bearing. Since the T1 Phono SB includes a built-in electronically regulated motor with a push-button switch between 33 and 45 rpm, there's no need to move the belt to different notches to switch speeds. Finally, there's the 8.6" tonearm made from black aluminum with an adjustable counterweight for easy cartridge swapping, though it comes with a pre-mounted cartridge straight from the factory. The T1 Phono SB sounds great straight from the box, especially through its built-in phono preamp, which takes almost all the frustrating work out of the analog optimization process. Rhythm and pacing are solid, and there is a ton of life and excitement pouring out of the speakers. For under $500, listeners can get a true hi-fi turntable with many of the bells and whistles that come with higher-end gear, one that's easily set up and eminently functional. Highly recommended for anyone getting into vinyl for the first time, it is TAS' 2023 Budget Product of the Year. (339)

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Wadax Akasa Reference DC Cables and Reference PSU

$20,400 each/$52,700

It's one thing to design and build a state-of-the-art digital playback system, but it's another to significantly improve upon that system's performance for existing owners. That's exactly what Wadax has done with the Reference DAC and Reference Server; the company recently began offering upgraded Akasa DC Reference cables that connect the DAC to its two external power supplies, as well as the Reference PSU, an outboard supply that replaces the Server's integral supply. But how much difference can there be between cables carrying DC? A lot, surprisingly. We should no longer be surprised by anything in audio, but replacing the stock DC cables with the Akasa cables resulted in a wholesale improvement of what was already the state of the art in digital playback. The immediate impression is one of greater clarity, transparency, and resolution—the feeling that a scrim between listener and the music has been removed. The midrange through the treble is more open and airier, with greater life, presence, and immediacy; yet, at the same time, textures are lusher and more liquid. The Reference PSU, the external power supply for the server, is equally impressive, delivering a similar sonic improvement. Together the Reference DC Cables and Reference PSU somehow managed to elevate the already stellar performance of the Wadax products. These Wadax upgrades represent high-end audio at its best—the relentless pursuit of musical realism realized with cutting-edge technical innovation. (344)

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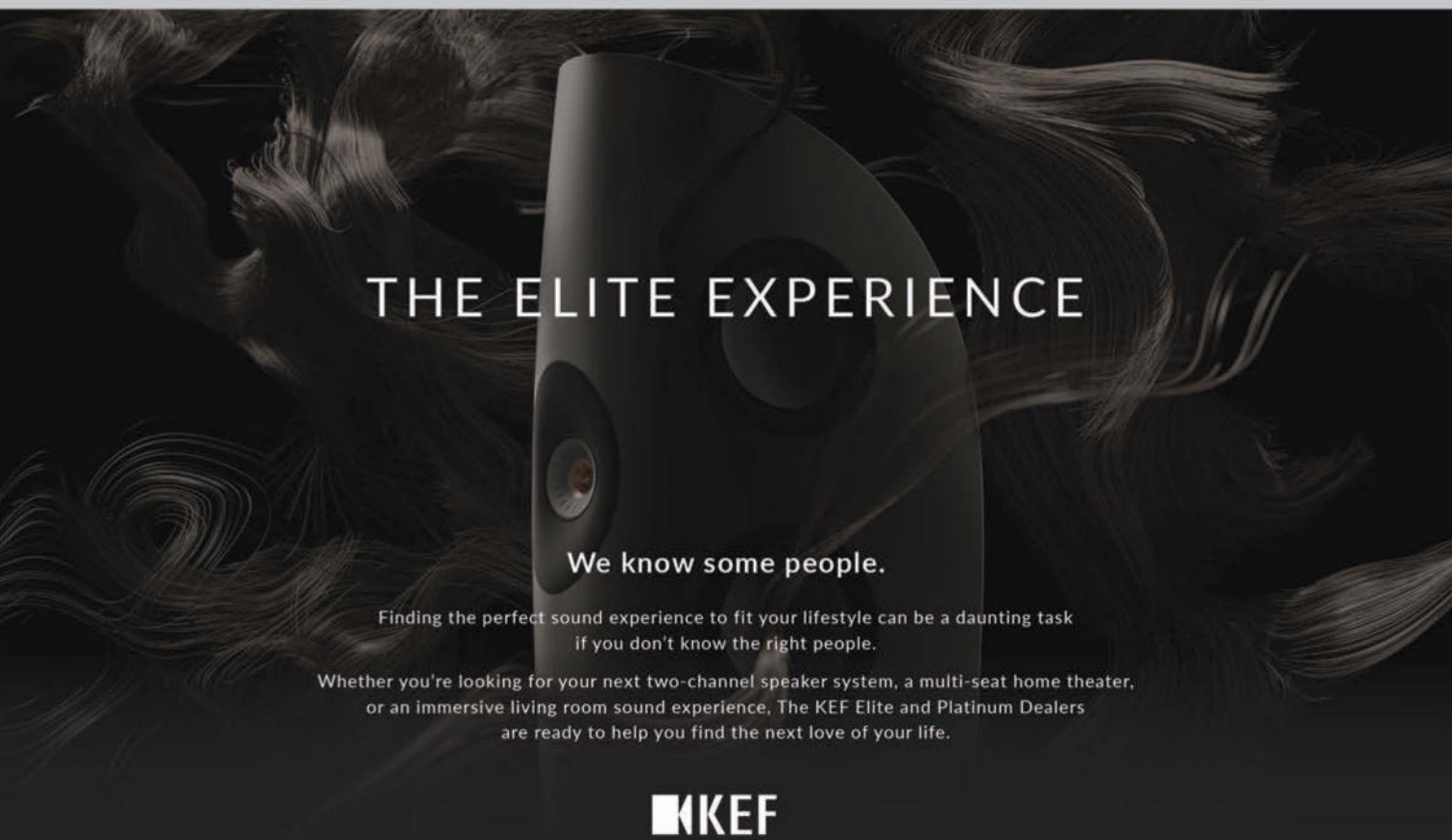

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Product of the Year Awards

Overall Product of the Year

MBL 101 X-Treme MKII Loudspeaker
$398,000

How do you improve on a truly great loudspeaker, especially a *sui generis* one like the six-foot-tall, four-tower MBL 101 X-Treme *Radialstrahler* system? Well, you have to add something you didn't realize was missing in the first place. In this case, *very* low bass. In JV's relatively small digs, the 101 X-Treme MKIIs' new subwoofer stacks now (measurably and audibly) reproduce 16Hz notes at the same sound pressure level as 1kHz ones—resulting in a low-end extension, clarity, dimensionality, and dynamic impact that JV has never before experienced at home, at a show, or in anyone else's listening room. As he said, ecstatically, when he first heard Jürgen Reis' new subs, "This is unbelievable!" How has Jürgen managed this feat? Through multiple changes to the crossover, drivers, electronics, and enclosures of the sub stacks (none of the parts are the same as those in the MKI subs), and the addition of the ingeniously designed, adjustable analog equalization. You not only get unparalleled bottom-octave extension, resolution, presence, and power; you also get a superior, near-seamless blend of cone subwoofers and *Radialstrahlers* in the mid-to-upper bass, making for what is, far and away, the best low-end reproduction JV has heard from a loudspeaker of any kind. When you add this incredible bass to the already nonpareil upper bass, midrange, and treble of MBL's unenclosed omnidirectional drivers, you end up with a full-range, three-dimensional sound that will raise goosebumps on just about every well-recorded track. This is something different and better, friends—something you haven't heard before from a stereo system and something that easily earns TAS' 2023 Overall Product of the Year Award. As JV wrote in his review, if TAS had such an honor, it would get his vote for Product of the New Millennium. (342) tas

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Jonathan Valin, *THE ABSOLUTE SOUND*, Issue 339

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MoFi Electronics MasterPhono Phonostage

Overachiever

Michael Fremer

Put yourself in the shoes of an audio designer like industry veteran Peter Madnick. You are tasked with creating a phono preamplifier at a given price point. In the case of the MoFi MasterPhono phonostage, around $6000. That puts it not at the "luxury" level but well above "entry level."

Absent price constraints, a designer can offer high sonic performance *and* a generous feature menu, but as the price drops, the higher becomes the tension between features and performance.

Madnick set high design bars for both features *and* performance and then got down to figuring out how to offer both for $6k. For instance, the best way to minimize noise and increase S/N ratios would be to locate the power supply outboard in its own chassis, but a second chassis and an umbilical would add to the final price and perhaps limit other features.

His "workaround" puts two boxes within a single structure, sufficiently separated from one another and ground-isolated. The power supply and microprocessor-control business are upfront, adjacent to the front panel's buttons and knobs, while the low-voltage signal-processing circuitry is in the rear, just behind the panel-mounted RCA and XLR inputs and outputs. The most sensitive circuitry containing discrete JFET amplification and passive RIAA equalization are separately housed within a temperature-controlled shielded-copper enclosure.

Copper-tube conduits, one on each side of the interior frame adjacent to attractive outer wooden side panels and one in the center, move shielded DC back to the main board on one side and AC from the rear-panel IEC jack to the upfront power supply on the other. The middle copper tube routes control-function ribbon cables.

Feature Packed Functionality

You have a choice of three chassis-mounted rear-panel inputs: a transimpedance mc input for which you can choose either single-ended RCA or balanced XLR input (but not both simultaneously), plus a single-ended RCA and balanced voltage-gain-based mm/mc input that's front-panel switchable. In other words, you can simultaneously use *both* voltage-gain inputs and one of the current inputs and switch between them on the front panel.

Each input "remembers" its settings, including (if applicable) gain, loading, mono/stereo, and subsonic filter. A front-panel rotary switch sets 40, 50, 60, and 70dB gain (nominal, depending upon whether you are using the unit single-ended or balanced). A second rotary knob selects loading of 15 ohms, 30, 50, 75, 100, 500,1k ohms, 10k ohms, and 47k ohms + 150pF. There's also an "options" position that selects the rear-mounted RCA jacks where you can insert your resistive choice of loading plugs. This is far more convenient than having to open things up to install resistors into board-mounted sockets. Subsonic filter and mono buttons sit between the input and loading knobs. The only missing option is capacitive loading for the mm setting, which is pre-set to a very reasonable 150pF. However, additional capacitance can be added via the rear-panel "options" jacks.

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ton. A brief press toggles the meter backlight on and off. Simultaneously pressing and turning the input knob adjusts LED and meter backlight brightness.

Pressing and holding the button puts the meters into "Mode 1." Playing the first track on the Analogue Productions *Ultimate Analogue Test LP*, you use the gain knob to adjust the meters to 0dB. Pressing the "meter" button again puts the meters into "Mode 2," which sums the outputs and puts the channels out of phase with one another. If the meters show zero output, your channels are electrically balanced. If there is output, you'd adjust azimuth to produce a total "null" between the channels and zero output.

While that produces perfect electrical channel balance, it does not guarantee maximum separation, as anyone who's used an oscilloscope to set azimuth can attest. Often, one can achieve better L-R/R-L separation numbers with the balance off by 0.5dB or so. Nonetheless, this is a convenient, easy-to-use feature that will give users a reasonable approximation of ideal azimuth setting, and sometimes perfect electrical balance does produce maximum separation.

If all that functionality wasn't enough, there's also a nicely milled aluminum remote control from which you can select input, gain, loading, subsonic filter, mono, mute, and even extinguish the front panel LEDs. Pushing the "light" button again doesn't turn the LEDs back on, but pushing any other button does. (MoFi says a software update has changed how this operates.)

Setup and Use

Setup was straightforward, so no need to go through the obvious, though I did run it both balanced and single-ended "out." When you first turn on the MasterPhono, the front panel runs through the full LED set and lands on whichever input you last used. If you've used the transimpedance input, all the LEDs surrounding the loading knob are extinguished. The instructions mistakenly say both resistive loading and gain LEDs are extinguished in this mode but not so. The gain LED setting remains lit, and you can adjust. (That will be fixed in subsequent manual printings.) It's a minor point, but I wish both front- and rear-panel illustrations were presented in the manual (only the rear is) and both were more clearly drawn than the current manual's rear-panel illustration.

Sound

If you are interested in a phono preamp that imparts to what it's fed noticeable warmth or enriched textures and detail-robbing sweetness, the MasterPhono is not for you. Let's start there. It strives for timbral neutrality and mostly achieves it, meaning it delivers a cartridge's essential character. If I had to ascribe a tonal character, I'd say the MasterPhono is ever so slightly on the warm side of neutral. I was able to use it with more than a few cartridges, a few that are under review now, among them the $3995 Analog Relax EX 300 (0.5mV output 15-ohm internal impedance) and the $2995 Miyajima Labs Carbon (0.23mV output, 16-ohm internal impedance). I also ran the Lyra Atlas Lambda SL, Audio-Technica AT MC2022, and Ortofon Diamond.

The EX300 and Carbon, both wood-bodied cartridges, are more similar in personality than they are different, though they do not sound identical. The MasterPhono in either voltage or current mode allowed their well-balanced but "woody" qualities to express themselves, though 15- and 16-ohm internal impedances pushed the limits of effective current-mode operation and through the voltage gain input both sounded somewhat fuller, richer, and, I suspect, more like what the designers were trying to achieve.

The ability to easily switch between current and voltage modes is not unique to the MasterPhono, but it's a useful feature offered in only a few phono preamps I know of, especially at or near this price point. When I used the current-mode input with the Lyra Atlas Lambda SL with its 1.52-ohm internal impedance and 0.25mV output, I got to hear the "maxed out" MasterPhono. I doubt many buyers of the $6000 MasterPhono will use it with a $12,995 cartridge (or a $300,000 OMA K3 turntable, though mine is a far less costly, though equal-

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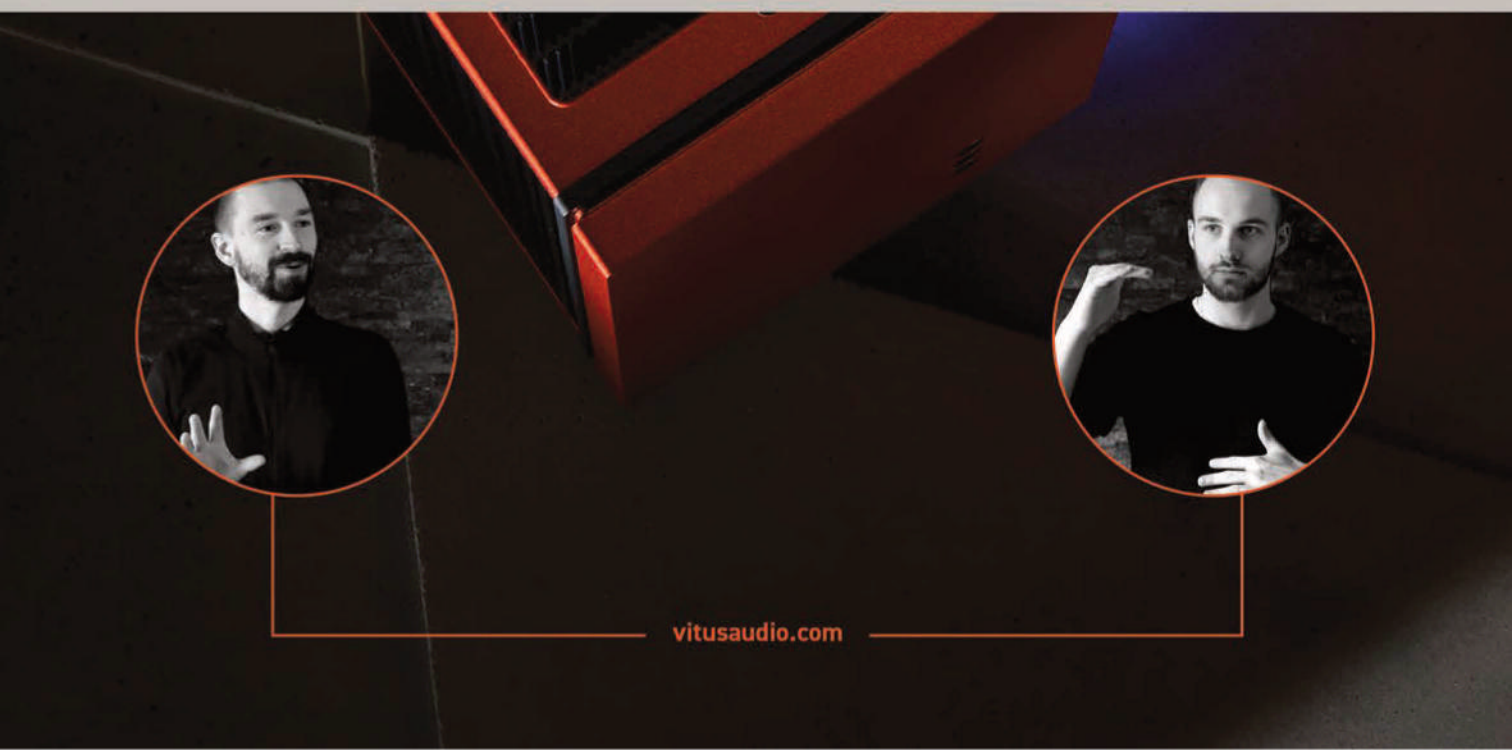

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ly good-sounding prototype), but it was interesting to hear the combo!

I spent a few hours the other day comparing four pressings of Van Morrison's 1970 release *His Band And The Street Choir*: an original white-label promo (an RL Sterling Sound mastering), a standard original green-label RL pressing, the Tom Biery-produced Warner Brothers reissue cut in 2008 by Kevin Gray at AcousTech mastering located at RTI's pressing plant, and finally the brand new Rhino High Fidelity issue cut by Gray at Cohearent Audio. I took notes, with all observations based on the Lyra Atlas Lambda SL into the current mode.

This is an exceptionally fine Elliot Scheiner recording produced at the late Phil Ramone's A&R Studios that's only sounded better and better as my system has improved over the past 50-plus years, with more and more previously hidden detail exposed and a greater ability to hear into the expertly crafted mix—like the subtle use of variable reverb applied to "I'll Be Your Lover, Too" and the dramatic acoustic guitar punctuation, the dynamics of which now produce a major "jump" factor but which years ago were just "there."

Right from the opening bars of "Domino," which begins with a cleanly rendered guitar line and an in-the-room wood block, you know you are in for a great sonic ride. This is as natural a sounding studio recording and three-dimensional mix as that era produced. The MasterPhono delivered all the mix's subtle layers and did an especially good job on the high-frequency percussive transients. The cymbals on "Call Me Up in Dreamland" particularly impressed with just the right combination of sparkle and transient precision. The backup singers were all easily heard as individuals and not as a mass of voices.

The acoustic guitar on "Crazy Face" is placed well back in the mix but should be easily followed throughout. The MasterPhono managed it well. When Van's horn enters shrieking on "Crazy Face," it should be well forward of the guitar and the fluttery modulation fast and well-focused but not at all edgy. Percussive acoustic guitar accents should cut through as musical punctuation marks, and a tremeloed organ floating behind should percolate in its own juices. The MasterPhono presented all this harmonically fleshed out and spatially well organized. A hallmark of a great phono preamp (or of any piece of audio electronics) is the ability to see deeply into a great mix and effortlessly sort out the parts without disturbing the cohesion with spotlighting. The MasterPhono did that with ease on all versions of this album, though the new Gray mastering easily came out on top.

On the doo-wop/New Orleans-ish "Give Me A Kiss" there's a Fats Domino-like piano part sitting in the background on the left channel that can easily get lost or lose note definition. The MasterPhono did a really good job there, too. On "I've Been Working" you can almost hear someone pick up a tambourine and then start hitting it. On all these pressings the exceptionally cleanly recorded tambourine zills were effectively engraved into the grooves but especially on the original and the new Rhino edition. The moderately priced

MasterPhono delivered them with impressive transient precision—neither too sharp nor too soft and finely sized well back on the soundstage.

When I finished, I played selections from the four pressings on the CH Precision P10, also here for review. It costs $77,000. I would have written the same listening notes—which is not to suggest the two phono preamps sounded alike—trust me, they did not—but both reliably expressed the relative pressing differences, though one with alarming precision painted on a black velvet backdrop.

Without switching back to the P10, I was perfectly content listening to this record, among many others, of course, through the MasterPhono, feeling I was getting the full picture. When Peter Madnick was here delivering and installing it, we did a few back-and-forth comparisons, and while he kept his opinions close to the vest, he clearly heard the differences between $77k and $6k, but we both were impressed and satisfied by the MasterPhono's quiet backgrounds, nimble well-extended bass performance, upper-frequency transient precision, three-dimensional soundstaging, satisfying dynamics, and overall timbral neutrality. Producing at this price point a high level of detail resolution and subtle textural authority while avoiding even a hint of glare or grain is difficult to accomplish. The MasterPhono does it.

After a few months of back and forth listening to both the current and voltage inputs, it's easy to conclude that if the MasterPhono can satisfy on a massive system into which it's been, you could say, unfairly placed, in the real-world context in which it will most likely find a home, it's likely to please most listeners, other than perhaps tube aficionados. While the MasterPhono's overall timbral balance is on the slightly warm but very pleasing side, it doesn't have the sonic glow those folks crave. Fair enough. But for everyone else, the combination of an unusually full feature set and an impressive level of transparency and sophisticated imaging and staging combined with timbral generosity and transient delicacy should satisfy.

The Shure V15VxMR Caper

Well into the review, a mini-controversy erupted over the "Original Source" reissue of Emil Gilels' Brahms Piano Concertos with Eugen Jochum conducting the Berlin Philharmonic (DGG 4864502) a double-LP set that the EBS team inscribed fully into the grooves—no compression, no limiting, and no bass attenuation to be sure every turntable could handle it. *The Tracking Angle* Reviewer Michael Johnson's Umami Red had trouble tracking parts of it. I played it through the Lyra Atlas Lambda SL on the SAT CF1-12 arm and sent a file to Michael who heard the same issues (they were more problematic for him than for me, but then he plays in a symphony orchestra), so we decided to give it the Shure V15VxMR "trackability test."

I installed the V15 on the Schröder/OMA "girder arm," set the tracking force to 1 gram (1.5 actually—the brush lowers it 0.5g), and played and recorded the most difficult to track parts of side 3, which is cut almost to the label. The Shure did as advertised and tracked it best.

It was also an opportunity to audition the MasterPhono's mm input, and the results demonstrated what mm advocates love about their favorite—outstanding tracking, of course, observational flat frequency response (not measured), and a full, rich "meaty" sound that lost mc sparkle and flash but gained undeniable weight and richness.

There are better-sounding phono preamps, but you'll have to pay a great deal more to get what makes them so.

You'll be able to hear the V15 and MasterPhono on a Gilels excerpt embedded in Johnson's *The Tracking Angle* review. The piano sound has impressive weight and body, yet the transients are not softened. The combo paints a pleasing picture that even committed mc advocates will appreciate.

On the *His Band and The Streetchoir* Van's vocals and those of the background singers had convincing and honest textures, free of glare. On "Virgo Clowns" there's a bass clarinet on the right channel and a mandolin on the left. I'm very familiar with it, but the weight and texture of this rendering produced from this track a series of new pleasures.

Conclusion

Designer Peter Madnick has designed an uncommonly versatile and fun-to-use phono preamplifier with a modern, full-function, remote-controllable feature set: multiple inputs, voltage- and current-based mc inputs, a full range of gain and loading adjustments, a subsonic filter, and a mono button, plus meters that are for more than just watching. Made in America, build-quality is also high, and with its wood side cheeks it's good looking too.

The MasterPhono's sonic performance in all modes matches the unit's attractive looks and versatility. Through all inputs its overall sonic demeanor is on the ever-so-slightly sweet side, but it never sounded frustratingly soft or warm. Instead, its combination of timbral neutrality, background quiet, deftly delivered transients, pleasing image focus, stable imaging, generous soundstaging, and especially its deft balance of all these important phono preamp qualities will let your cartridge's sonic personality shine.

These days on the internet some people won't pay attention unless you scream conclusions like "Giant-killer," "You won't believe your ears," "If there's anything better I haven't heard it (and I've heard four phono preamps in my one-year reviewing career)," "A game-changer," or "No need to spend more—this is as good as it gets," but I don't do that.

You *will* believe your ears, and your ears will tell you this is a well-balanced, honest, and "musical"-sounding phono preamp that you'll immediately appreciate and are not likely to get tired of for a very long time, if ever. There are better-sounding phono preamps, but you'll have to pay a great deal more to get what makes them so.

I'll conclude with: The made-in-America MoFi MasterPhono is among the easiest, most versatile, and fun-to-use phono preamps available today, and it's also among the most pleasing sounding for its price and well beyond. Highly recommended. tas

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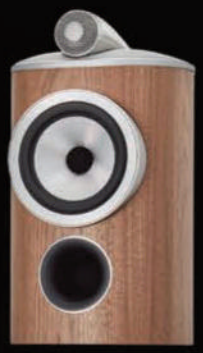

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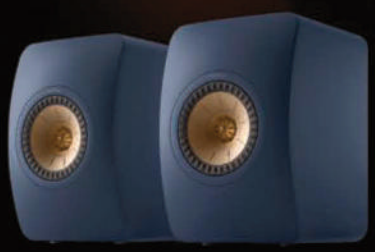

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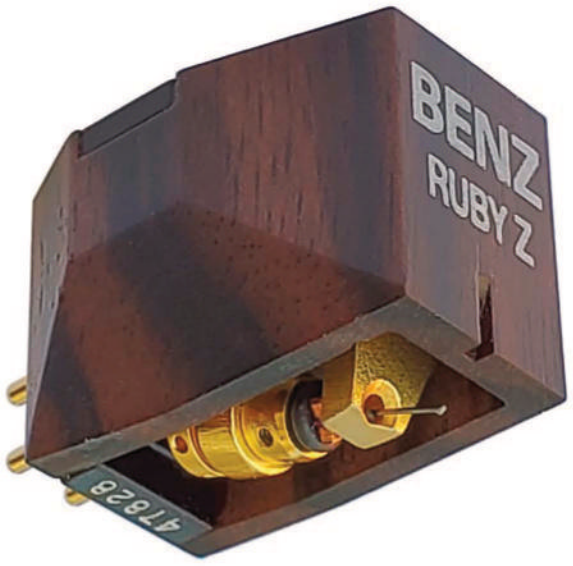

Benz Micro Ruby Z Moving-Coil Cartridge

Wholly Immersive

Wayne Garcia

It's no coincidence that many of the world's finest phono cartridges come from countries whose names are essentially synonymous with precision craftsmanship: Japan, Germany, and Switzerland. The latter is where the late Ernst Benz, an aviator and multi-disciplined inventor, founded the Benz Micro audio-manufacturing company in the 1980s. In 1994, Albert Lukaschek acquired Benz Micro, dedicating his company to developing meticulously hand-built high-end phonograph cartridges.

As the company website proudly states: "Coils are wound by hand under intense magnification; cartridge bodies and chassis parts are constructed and assembled in-house; and each cartridge is carefully listened to by Mr. Lukaschek himself. Any cartridge that does not meet his strict criteria will go back for adjustment until it is perfect."

Benz cartridges are well known for combining excellent detail with a warm, sweetly musical sound, and the $4000 Ruby Z upholds that tradition. Housed in a handsome Zebrawood body, the Ruby's name is more than a pretty tag; it refers to the ruby square plate at the core of the coil winding, which has the advantages of being both lightweight (hence, ultra-fast and responsive) and non-ferrous (so magnetic interference is rendered moot). Benz also uses this ruby-plate generator in its other top models, the Gullwing, LP, and LP-S.

Weighing in at just 10.6 grams, the Ruby Z was designed to be compatible with a wide range of tonearms, from the best of today's offerings to what the company tactfully describes as "older models lacking the energy control, bearing designs, or counter-weight range" of contemporary arms.

I auditioned the Ruby Z with two turntable rigs from Basis Audio (the company's newest model, the Bravo with Vector arm that I reviewed in Issue 341) and my own Basis 2200/Vector 4 setup. Benz's U.S. distributor, Michael Fajen of Sierra Sound, recommended 500-ohm loading, and as my Sutherland N1's phonostage offers a 475-ohm option, that's what I used, to excellent effect.

Spinning Yarlung Records' outstanding 45rpm pressing of Bach's Partita No. 2 in D Minor for solo violin revealed the Ruby Z's inherent musicality. If you don't know this LP, I urge you to grab a copy. It's about as natural a rendition of a violin captured in real space as you're going to hear, and Petteri Iivonen's playing is first rate—sensitive and nuanced far beyond what one would expect from a 20-year-old (which he was in 2008, the date of this recording).

The Ruby Z did a lovely job recreating the ambience of the Alfred Newman Hall in L.A., where the recording was made, and its reproduction of the bloom of air around the violin, the timbre of Iivonen's 1767 Gagliano fiddle, the texture of wood and strings—like a fine Tequila, warm and semi-sweet but with the right balance of toothy edge—the harmonic overlay, the micro-dynamics, the dancing virbrancy of Bach's masterwork were wholly immersive.

In a nutshell, this record nicely encapsulated the Ruby Z's personality, which was given further room to roam when I played Joe Henderson's *The State of the Tenor Vol. 1: Live at the Village Vanguard*, one of the great gifts of Blue Note's Tone Poet series.

Recorded in 1985 and originally released the following year, this recording had eluded me until the Tone Poet reissue. *The State of the Tenor* finds the then 48-year-old Henderson in peak form, with a marvelous pair of bandmates—Ron Carter on bass and Al Foster on drums—as musical brothers-in-arms.

More closely miked than some live sets at the Vanguard, *State of the Tenor* nevertheless captures the intimacy and warmth of this small, fabled venue. Henderson's tenor and the drums occupy the center space, sax up front, drums riding behind. Ron Carter's throbbing, driving bass sits left of center. Again, the Ruby Z delivered a finely nuanced balance, comprising the natural warmth of the tonal, textural, and tactile elements of each instrument along with excellent detail, dynamic snap, and a rollicking verve that makes this set sizzle with life.

Like many of us, I'm a fan of much of DG's back catalog, with its exceptional roster of artists and performances, while frequently lamenting the less-than-stellar sonics of older pressings, especially those from the 70s and beyond. Given that, I was excited to check out a few titles from the label's recently launched Original Source Series, in which, DG proclaims,

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Type: Low-output moving coil
Output voltage: 0.35mV
Body: Vented, machined Zebra wood
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Stylus: Micro-ridge
Coil: Square ruby jewel plate
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Recommended tracking force: 1.8–2.0g
Recommended tonearm mass: Medium to high
Recommended loading: 500–47k ohms
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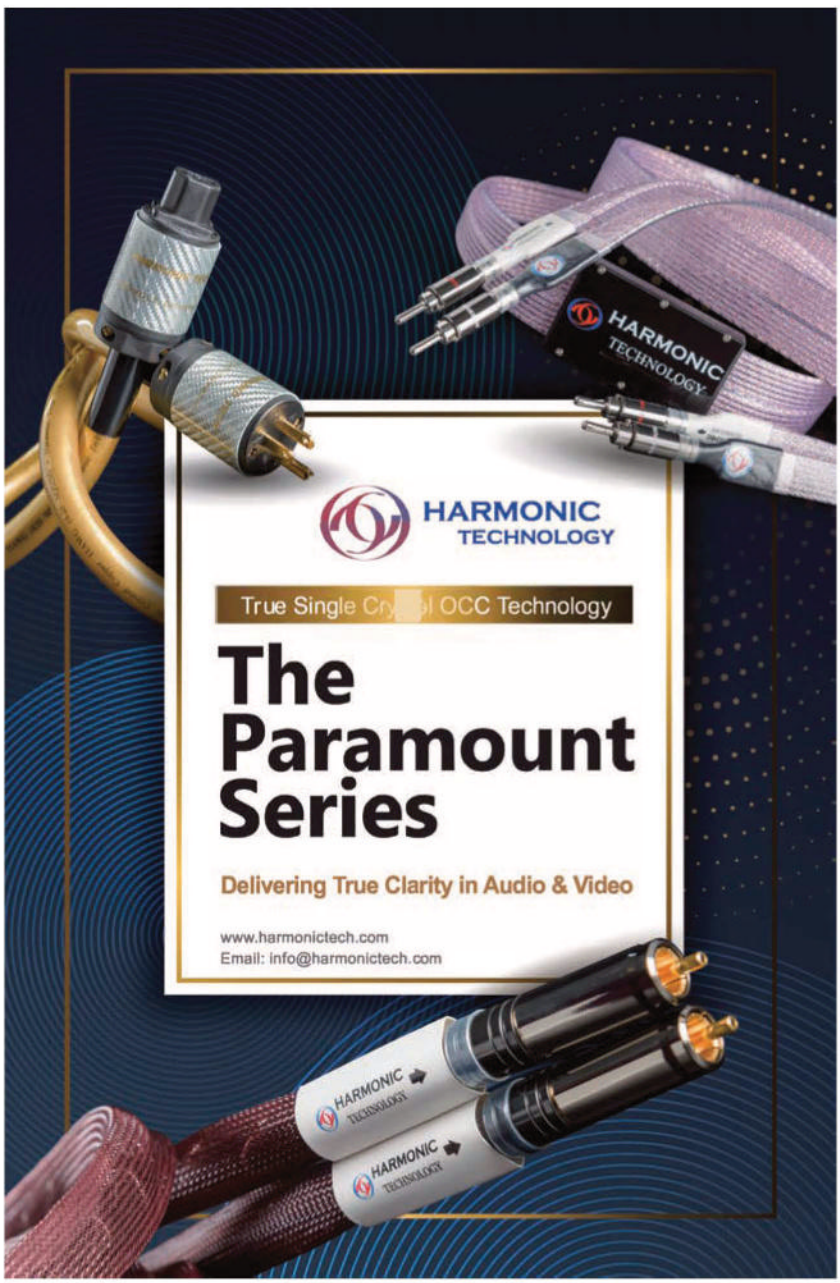
Listening to the new edition of the Karajan Mahler Symphony No 5, a recording I purchased on release in 1975, I was bowled over by the huge improvement this reissue offers over that now almost 50-year-old edition. Rather than the cool, compressed, two-dimensional sound that caused me to shelve this LP for ages, the Original Source release sounds enveloping and warm, with lush string tone and dynamics like we've never heard before from this disc—explosive brass and percussion and a natural sense of orchestral weight. Note, as well, there is far greater instrumental detail in tone and texture. During the famous Adagietto, massed strings sound sweet and silky with rosin, the French horns warm, mellow, and rich. The entire orchestra held together very nicely during massively complex passages, as the Ruby Z tracked the grooves with no-sweat aplomb.

Finally, to an LP I play with some frequency, Evgeny Kissin's deeply felt reading of Beethoven's Piano Sonata No 32, where the Ruby Z rendered a fine sense of the venue's ambience from this live recording, with an excellent "bloom" of air surrounding the piano. There was also fine tonal coherence across the spectrum.

The second movement's more delicate passages reveal the fine harmonic layering the Benz can deliver. As Kissin works his way into and then away from the jazz-like passage that bridges the movement, one really senses Beethoven's architectural chops in action. The denouement is one of music's sublime passages, and here the Benz took my breath away with its whisper-like delicacy and sheer beauty of tone.

Comparisons to my reference My Sonic Lab Signature Gold speak well of the Ruby Z. Although it might not take you quite as far regarding the nth degrees of, well, everything, and bass notes may not have quite the punch or richness of the My Sonic, for less than half the price one could say the Ruby Z is twice the value. tas



Dynaudio Confidence 20 Loudspeaker

Uncommonly Excellent

Neil Gader

The Confidence Series from Dynaudio stands at the summit of the Danish company's wide range of loudspeakers. Comprising four models—three are floorstanders, slender designs built in three-way bass-reflex configurations, ranging from the 64"-tall Confidence 60 to the smaller 59" Confidence 50, and 52" Confidence 30. Transducer and crossover technology are shared in a lineup with mutual DNA separated mostly by size. And then there's the lone two-way compact, the stand-mount Confidence 20, under review. But don't shed a tear for its lack of a third driver or its diminutive specification. As I discovered, the Confidence 20 more than knows how to take care of itself.

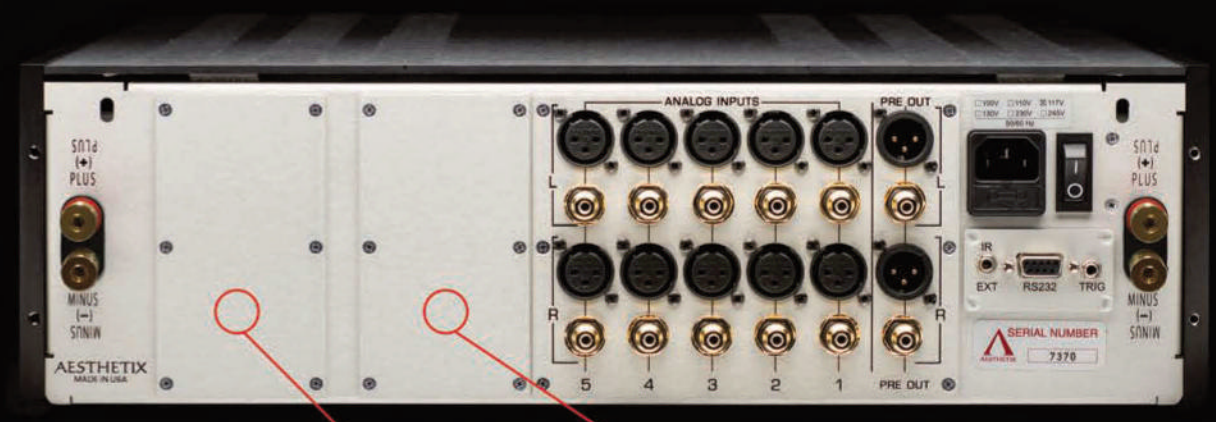
Like its floorstanding siblings, the $13,000 Confidence 20 features a 28mm Esotar3 soft-dome tweeter, developed with over 40 years of Dynaudio expertise. Dynaudio states it's the finest tweeter it has ever created. It uses a powerful neodymium magnet system and adds innovations in airflow routing (via optimized venting), including a larger rear chamber and the resonance-stabilizing Hexis inner dome.

The 7" NeoTec MSP mid/woofer also sports neodymium under the hood and uses glass-fiber in its voice-coil former for optimum stiffness. The voice coil itself is lightweight aluminum, while the entire woofer motor has been designed to harness airflow using a venting system that's been machined directly into the magnet. The Confidence 20's bass-reflex design incorporates an innovative downward-firing bass port that operates in league with the dedicated floor stands. These handsome, top-notch stands are very stable and highly adjustable and include both spikes and floor-saving footpads. (They can be sand filled at the owner's discretion, too.) The stands anchor the Confidence 20s with, uh, confidence and elevate the base of the speakers slightly to enable the bottom-firing ports to operate freely. Dynaudio equips the Confidence 20 with a single pair of high-quality binding posts.

Cabinet construction is what I've come to expect from Dynaudio and Danish manufacturers in general—superb. John Quick, the well-versed and cordial VP of Sales and Marketing for Dynaudio North America, stated that "the main part of the cabinet is made up of multiple layers of MDF that are bonded together and machined to create the rounded cabinet shape. This 'exoskeleton' structure, along with carefully placed extensive bracing, creates a cabinet that is inert and low in diffraction, but also flowing and pleasing to the eye." As for the Compex front baffle, its actual composition is cloaked in corporate secrecy, but according to Quick it "allows quick dissipation of any energy generated by the drivers and a mechanical impedance mismatch that resists energy from the cabinet migrating back into it." It's light and strong and acoustically dead. Quick did reveal that in all Confidence models a substance known as Poron (a type of high-density polyurethane foam) is sandwiched between the Compex baffle and the cabinet to decouple the tweeters and midrange drivers from the baffle as much as possible and avoid vibration.

The advantages of two-way compacts are well known, as are their drawbacks. On the one hand, there is the image focus and coherence that two closely spaced drivers impart; the small footprint, narrow baffle, and simpler crossover conspire to make for a great middle/upper range and a sensitive voice speaker. On

You've got options.



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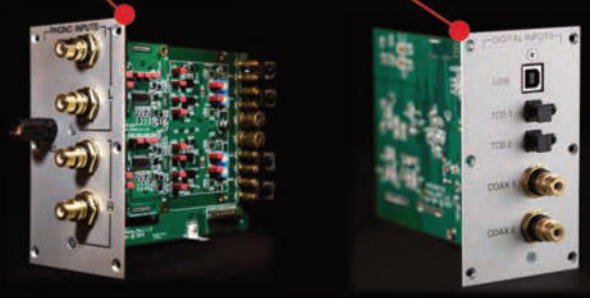

DAC OPTION

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Nominal Impedance: 6 ohms (5 ohms minimum @ 155Hz)
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Front end: SOTA Cosmos Eclipse turntable; SME V tonearm; Cartridges, Clearaudio Charisma, Sumiko Palo Santos; Phono Stage, Parasound JC 3+, Pass Labs XP-17; Media Player/DAC, dCS Bartok Apex; dCS Puccini (SACD); Lumin S1 Music Player; Synology NAS; USA Tube Audio RS9 Server, MacBook Pro/Pure Music; Integrated Amplifiers, Aesthetix Mimas, MBL Corona C51; Preamplifier, Pass Labs XP-12; Loudspeakers; ATC SCM50T, SCM20P, REL S/812 subs (2); Cables & Power Cords, Wireworld Silver Eclipse 8 interconnect & speaker, Audience Au24frontRow cables and power cords, Synergistic Atmosphere Level Four; Shunyata Venom NR power cords. Audience USB, AudioQuest Carbon firewire; Wireworld Platinum Starlight 8 Ethernet; Power Conditioners, Audience aR6-T4, Shunyata Hydra Delta D6 conditioner; Accessories, Stillpoints Ultra 5, Townshend Audio Seismic Podiums, VooDoo Cable Iso-Pod, Critical Mass Systems rack

the downside are restricted bass output and dynamics, because there is only so far you drive/push a pair of small transducers before they begin to compress the music. A three-way relieves a lot of this pressure, but more and larger drivers require bigger and more robustly braced cabinets to control internal resonances and more complex crossovers, as well as adding to expense and taking up greater space.

Putting the Confidence 20 through its sonic paces, I first noted a level of harmonic clarity, imaging finesse, and micro-/macro-dynamic energy that immediately informed me that I'd left the land of the *common* two-way. No shrinking violet, the Confidence 20 not only didn't shy away from the dynamic and output challenges presented by rock and large-scale orchestral music; it, in fact, seemed to relish them to an *uncommon* degree. To that point, I listened to Van Halen's "Jump" and "Right Now" [Warner], with a little of Dire Straits' "Telegraph Road" [Vertigo] and Tchaikovsky's *1812* Overture [Mercury] thrown in for good measure. I haven't pushed a two-way this hard for a long time, but this speaker made me throw caution to the wind. The Confidence 20 played through these tracks without protest and with tonal consistency and openness.

The 20's overall character was defined by a smooth balance with just a slight suggestion of a midrange-forward tilt. While its focus was plainly on the midrange, I never got the impression of octaves radically dipping or rising or skewing out of alignment with one another. I considered its tonal signature to be on the warmer side of neutral. Confidence 20 does not have a lean or cold personality, unlike some overheated compacts I've known (and, in my earlier years as a reviewer, even admired) that were all speed and laser-focused imaging. Transient information was imparted with quickness but was also tempered with naturalism. The tweeter/mid/woofer connection was as unified as I've heard in this type of speaker; only the best coaxial drivers will surpass the Confidence 20 on this front. This is all another way of saying that the Confidence 20 is a superb voice speaker, reproducing the full spectrum of chest resonances, throatiness, falsetto, and head tone. A favorite go-to, Jennifer Warnes' "If It Be Your Will" [Impex], was luminous and airy, her focused vocal and natural sibilance range touching the ear with sensitivity and authenticity. Perhaps the 20 was a little dry in the treble at times and during hard peaks, but it was mostly a joy to listen to.

Earlier, I noted in extended listening the breadth of Confidence 20's dynamic envelope. Ordinarily, when volume and dynamics ramp up, you can hear a typical two-way hunkering down into a sort of protective crouch, as if pulling back from a sonic precipice, in effect squelching the biggest and wildest dynamic swings and rolling off the bass. There was little evidence of that tendency during Steve Winwood's "The Finer Things." Fully present and accounted for was the neck-snapping snare as it joined the full impact of the drummer's floor pedal against the kick drum. In these instances, I found myself jokingly looking for a third driver—a midrange—figuring it had to be around there someplace. In my experience, I've rarely heard a two-way compact that packed as many of the virtues of a three-way into such a small package.

Bass response was well controlled and vigorously extended into the 40Hz range. The downward-firing port exhibited little to no bloat or overhang. The virtuoso musi-

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Equipment Report

cianship of bassist Renaud Garcia-Fons' "Palermo Notturno" was on vivid display, evincing much of the deeply resonant and profound expressiveness that I'm familiar with from my own loudspeaker references. The 20s followed the bassline during Norah Jones' "Shoot the Moon" and the intro standup bass in the run-up to "Cold Cold Heart" [Blue Note] with nicely defined timbral and textural cues. They did the same with the standup bass in Harry Connick, Jr.'s "A Nightingale Sang in Berkeley Square" [Sony]. Ever present on these tracks was the sense of a player's index and middle fingers setting those long, loose, steel-wrapped bass strings into motion.

For most compact two-ways, reproducing organ remains a challenge. Even so, the pipe organ that undergirds the chorale during "Lux Aeterna" was very nicely represented by the Dynaudio. True, it was reproduced more as a darker undercurrent, not quite in its 20Hz entirety, but when the organist lifts his hands and feet and the instrument goes silent at points in this and other tracks on Rutter's *Requiem* [Reference], you could feel the air and weight vacate the hall. Naturally, there are the physical limits of excursion and enclosure volume, and at some point, the port assumes a greater presence. Still, there were little to no windage effects or chuffing to distract the listener.

A key takeaway that elevates the performance of the Confidence 20 was its ability to impart a scale and spatiality that are normally the domains of larger, multi-driver designs. What this means for a large chorus or chamber orchestra is a genuine sense of scope and dimension in the room, rather than a finely rendered miniature. In the case of solo piano, there was soundboard substance and venue-defining air movement to a concert grand. Many compacts down-convert these nine-footers to spinets, but the Dynaudio goes a long way to maintaining the illusion of a concert-hall instrument. Credit the excellent off-axis behavior and perceived in-room power response. At least some of the credit also accrues to the wider dispersion and slightly lower crossover point (2.3kHz) of the oversized tweeter.

There was a lot of low-level detail and resolving power and transparency on tap, as well—attributes that reinforced the way in which macro- and micro-dynamics can influence the mix of a multitrack recording—how they can intensify a track at the softest and loudest levels.

When I listened to Linda Ronstadt's cover of "The Moon is a Harsh Mistress" [Asylum], what often gets my attention is how ever-widening dynamic swings allow me to hear into the recorded balance of individual instruments with greater clarity. During "Moon," there's pianist Bill Payne's accompaniment, which introduces the song and is slightly offset from centerstage. Later, it recedes in level as a backing instrument, but the transparency and inner dynamics that the Dynaudio exposes on this track permitted me to hear beyond the note and "feel" just how heavy the player's touch was on this track. He's banging away in the final driving section of this song, and you can hear the weight of his touch on the keys as he punches each chord. I also noted, much to my surprise, that during Cat Stevens' delicate "Lilywhite" [Island], it was not just the guitar's high strings ringing out but also the dark resonances of the low-level cello—a cue that's often missing on many two-ways compacts. Another track that exemplified Confidence 20s ease at reproducing the many textures of acoustic instruments played together in real-time was Jackson Browne's "My Opening Farewell" [Asylum] from his 1972 self-titled debut album. Guided by some of the legendary players of the time, recording such as these are like time capsules in the way they impart the in-studio atmosphere of another era with eerie verisimilitude.

A lot is expected of a stand-mounted two-way in this premium price range—and rightfully so. Competition abounds in this segment, including some fine three-ways. But Dynaudio's Confidence 20 surpassed my expectation in style, build-quality, and performance. The Confidence 20 was passionately musical and emotionally moving like no other Dynaudio compact in my experience—sonically arresting and ultimately irresistible, making for an easy and enthusiastic recommendation. tas

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Tidal Audio Contros Digital Music Controller and Intra Stereo Power Amplifier

Transparency Defined…Again

Andrew Quint

For many audiophiles, the route taken to a "reference" component is circuitous, and the final destination can seem almost arbitrary. That's because, despite what some manufacturers (and most ad copywriters) would have you believe, there's never just *one* speaker, DAC, or interconnect that will assure audio bliss. Apart from issues of perceived sound quality, there are plenty of additional factors in play, such as aesthetics, cost, and the other components with which the gear will need to function synergistically or, even more simply, which elite brands the dealer you trust has chosen to carry. If it's Focal and not Rockport or Magico, that could be why you ended up, quite happily, with a Sopra N° 3s rather than Atria IIs or A5s. This is especially true with electronics for which, among the top competitors, sonic differences can be less apparent than for, say, loudspeakers or phono cartridges. For me personally, the issue may have been proximity, specifically proximity to Doug White.

White is the owner of The Voice That Is, a boutique audio dealer about a half an hour outside of Philadelphia. TVTI carries a number of premium brands, but White may be most closely associated with Tidal Audio. As the manufacturer's "brand ambassador" for the United States, he's been the face of the company at American audio shows for some time. I first met Doug late one evening in the hotel bar at an AXPONA show and discovered that he lived and worked close to me in Pennsylvania. A few years later, I was reviewing a loudspeaker that clearly wasn't performing at its best because it required more power than I could provide with my usual amplifiers. I called White and asked if I could borrow something more suitable, and he brought over the then-new Intra. I was highly impressed and ended up purchasing Tidal's Ferios monoblocks (reviewed along with the Prisma preamplifier by Robert Harley in Issue 306) and then, a year later, the Contros digital controller and streamer. When RH asked if I'd formally write up the Contros and the Intra stereo amplifier, I was happy to oblige.

Jörn Janczak founded Tidal Audio in 1999 at the tender age of 24, after spending six months as the production manager for a German high-end loudspeaker manufacturer. ("I liked the job; I didn't like the circumstances.") From the beginning, his goal was to build both no-compromise speakers *and* electronics, an ambitious undertaking for a small company. While Janczak is skilled in all aspects of loudspeaker design and manufacture, he develops Tidal's electronic products in tandem with Lothar Braün, a highly accomplished amplifier specialist. "I design it, and he does the magic inside,"

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Contros Digital Music controller
Type: Volume-controlled DAC with streaming unit and 4 digital inputs
Formats supported: DSF, DFF, DoP, FLAC, ALAC, WAV, AIFF, MQA, MP3, AAC
Streaming services supported: Qobuz, Tidal, Apple Airplay, Spotify Connect
Inputs: SPDIF, AES/EBU, optical (TosLink), TIDAL-link, USB storage x2
Outputs: 2 XLR, 1 RCA
Dimensions: 17" x 5" x 17"
Weight: 36 lbs.
Price: $60,000

Intra Stereo Power Amplifier
Type: Solid-state stereo Class D power amplifier
Output power: 2x 340Wpc into 8 ohms, 670Wpc into 4 ohms (2-channel stereo); 4x 290Wpc into 8 ohms, 540Wpc in 4 ohms (dual-stereo mode); 2x 1180Wpc into 8 ohms, 1830Wpc in 4 ohms (dual-mono mode)
Inputs: 4x XLR
Dimensions: 17" x 5" x 17"
Weight: 27 lbs.
Price: $28,000

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Janczak told me when I encountered him at High End Munich 2023.

The Contros digital music controller is a generous-sized component, measuring roughly 17" x 5" x 17" and weighing in at 36 pounds. Externally, the first impression is one of elegant simplicity. The two knobs in front—a source selector that's also the on/off switch and a substantial volume control—are made of stainless steel and emerge from a glossy black acrylic faceplate. The polished metal surfaces are continued on the sides and as two lateral strips on the top of the component. Around back are three digital inputs—coaxial SPDIF, optical TosLink, and AES/EBU, as well as the proprietary Tidal Link connection and a pair of USB inputs for attaching storage devices. There are three outputs per channel, two balanced (XLR) and one single-ended (RCA). There's a LAN port (labeled "NET") to connect to the network for music streaming, along with two RJ45 jacks that can connect to Tidal amplifiers to turn them on when the Contros is powered up. You'll also find, of course, an IEC power receptacle, but Tidal doesn't provide power cords with any of its products, allowing the user to make a choice based on his budget and belief system.

But this rather chaste exterior hides from view some extremely advanced audio technology, charged with just a few basic functions—choosing the source, adjusting the level of a digital music datastream, and delivering it with fidelity to the power amplifier(s). "We think the music signal cannot be improved," Janczak said, "it can only be changed. The Golden Rule for us is to make the topology and signal paths as short as possible. In the case of our electronics in particular, we need deeply complicated topologies *around* the actual signal path to guarantee this simple goal." Tidal makes its own circuit boards in-house, and there's very little use of internal cabling. Local power is extensively employed—there are 22 low-noise local power supplies scattered around the Contros. The discrete Class A output amplifier is transformerless with no phase inversion of the musical signal.

There's no better example of a highly complex innovation operating out of sight than the Contros' UPLC (Ultra Precision Level Control), a technology found in other Tidal products, including the Presencio and Prisma, the company's phono-stage-bearing preamplifiers. A preamp's volume control is the potential Achilles heel of that device. Tidal uses a pricy ALPS potentiometer to control, digitally, a series of relays, each in a hermetically sealed environment to protect it from exposure to dust and humidity. Note that the potentiometer is used here only to transmit to the relay-resistor array the desired volume selected by the remote control or front-panel volume knob. Specifically, the potentiometer's output is digitized, with that digital code controlling the lossless digital volume control inside the R2R ladder-DAC itself. It's a very sophisticated approach that is different from the common relay-and-resistor volume controls found in other products. It took Tidal a decade to perfect this methodology, and it's completely invisible—inaudible—to the user. There's none of the discernible clicking heard with some other highly regarded volume controls.

It took Tidal a decade to perfect this methodology, and it's completely invisible—inaudible—to the user.

Digital-to-analog conversion is performed by a discrete 32-bit non-oversampling DAC. Non-oversampling? Tidal has implemented the second generation of its proprietary application called ASRT^2 (for Analog Signal Remediation Technology). Janczak agrees with most that a 44.1kHz sampling rate is "a pretty rough way to emulate the original soundwave." But rather than arbitrarily upsample to some multiple of the native rate, Tidal developed software that, it feels, is significantly better at "rebuild-

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ing" the 44.1kHz datastream via a smoother, more sophisticated form of data interpolation. Reclocking of an incoming digital datastream is accomplished by an ultra-low-noise oscillator; supported formats include DSD, DSF, and DFF via DoP, as well as FLAC, ALAC, WAVE, AIFF, MQA, MP3, and AAC. For streaming, the user must download one of several free network players—Lumin is the most highly recommended—to an iOS device. There's native support for Tidal (the streaming service), Qobuz, Apple Airplay, Spotify, and TuneIn Internet radio.

The overall appearance and dimensions of the Intra are very similar to those of the Contros, and the weight is just 27 pounds, making one and all aware that this is most certainly a Class D amplifier—three words that, even now, put this product out of the running for certain audiophiles. That's unfortunate, as Tidal has undertaken a years-long assessment of switching amplifiers. As many audio enthusiasts are aware, Tidal has established a partnership with Bugatti Automobiles and is committed to producing a line of loudspeakers bearing the Bugatti badge. The first Tidal-for-Bugatti model to become available, the Royale, can be had in exactly the colors of the Chiron parked in your driveway. Beginning at $348,000 per pair, these are amplified speakers, powered by Tidal-designed Class D amps. The Intra stereo amplifier, with a fully discrete Class A front end and Class D output stage represents "trickle-down" from the Bugatti project [see sidebar].

The Intra's design is based on two separate stereo modules that allow the amplifier to be used in several ways. On the rear panel are four XLR inputs and four pairs of stereo binding posts; small toggle switches let the user change the Intra from stereo mode to dual-mono operation. At its highest sonic potential, the Intra functions as a stereo amplifier, using one channel per module per speaker. The main power supply for each module is responsible for one channel—340Wpc into 8 ohms, 670Wpc into four ohms. (I was confident that the amplifier I'd borrowed from Doug White for a week or two would have no problems driving just about *anything*, and I was right.) The array of possible connections also facilitates bi-amping by connecting two channels per speaker, and the Intra can also drive four loudspeakers for a multichannel application. Finally, a listener can bridge the Intra's two stereo amplifiers to deliver a colossal amount of power to a subwoofer—1180Wpc into an 8-ohm load, 1830Wpc into 4 ohms.

The Tidal components were auditioned with two external digital sources, a Sony X1100ES universal disc player (used as a transport) and a Baetis Reference 3 music computer, plus the Contros's own internal streaming unit. Loudspeakers were Magico M2s, sometimes complemented with a Magico S-Sub. Analog wires included Siltech 880i balanced interconnects from Contros to Intra and 880L speaker cables from the Intra to the Magicos. For digital cabling, I used an Apogee Wyde Eye SPDIF to connect up the Sony and a Wireworld Platinum Starlight AES/EBU from Baetis to Contros. For power cords, I used robust Pangea models with both components. My room hasn't changed by as much as a cubic inch since the last review—it's a 225-square-foot space with a 10-to-12-foot ceiling, and always will be.

Most of my critical listening was done with the Contros and Intra pair, with the brief substitution of several other components, as noted below.

I have limited enthusiasm for head-to-head comparisons with "competing" gear at this end of the quality spectrum

With the best symphonic recordings (and there's none better than Decca's *La fille mal gardeé,* from 1962), string textures were richly characterized and initial percussion transients—triangle, woodblock, timpani—were crisply present. Electric bass and kick drum on well-recorded pop/rock (say, "Storm Warning" from Bonnie Raitt's 1994 album, *Longing in Their Hearts*) had satisfying punch, with or without subwoofer augmentation. Synthesizer bass on the title track from Jennifer Warnes' *The Hunter* manifested good bottom-octave extension. Joe Farrell's breathy flute sonority on a favorite Chick Corea cut ("Friends" off the 1978 album of the same name) registered as a column of air produced by someone blowing into a small-bore metal tube. Corea's electric piano on that selection was obviously a Rhodes, not a Wurlitzer. With all genres, background noise was minimal and there was plenty of dynamic headroom.

I have limited enthusiasm for head-to-head comparisons with "competing" gear at this end of the quality spectrum—how likely is it that a consumer is deciding among precisely the products a reviewer has on hand to contrast?—but allow that the exercise can provide context. I substituted the Theoretica Applied Physics BACCH-SP adio for the Contros, bypassing the crosstalk-cancellation filter. The main attraction of the BACCH-SP for most *is* the effect of XTC on spa-

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tiality, but the adio is a full-function preamp with an excellent DAC. With my enduring favorite orchestral test track, the first movement Allegretto of Shostakovich's Symphony No. 15 (Bernard Haitink conducting the Concertgebouw) the sound was enjoyable, though I noted a slight roughness in the upper strings and a flattening of the recorded perspective that I didn't hear with the Tidal combination. I would have been quick to blame those sonic qualities on the Intra's Class D topology if I'd heard the Theoretica as the system's preamp before the Contros. I also found that Tidal electronics could match the ability of modern state-of-the-art tube gear in terms of harmonic complexity—I was trying out the superb Ångstrom Stella SIA integrated—but with greater ease, quiet, and invisibility. Wonderful as it was, the Italian amp deviates from complete neutrality, which leads to an observation regarding all Tidal Audio products.

I'd not read RH's 2020 write-up of the Tidal Prisma and Ferios before writing a good portion of this review, including the subtitle "Transparency Defined." I was at first mortified to see that Robert's subheader—what magazine editors sometimes refer to as the "deck"—was "Transparency Incarnate." Should I come up with something a little more…original? Ultimately, I stuck with it, concluding that I'd independently identified a defining characteristic of Tidal electronics. My previous understanding of "transparency" was that, although it could stand on its own as a useful descriptor, it derived from other aspects of recorded sound, including, but not limited to, low levels of noise and measurable distortion, speed, and a lack of colorations across the frequency spectrum. When it came to these parameters, the Tidal gear was sometimes the equal of other products, sometimes not. And yet, the comparators would consistently fall short of the German brand in terms of their effectiveness at communicating musical meaning. "Transparency" *is* an independent variable when it comes to perceived sound quality, and no one does it better than Tidal.

Jörn Janczak on Class D Topology in Tidal Amplifiers

Why are audiophiles still suspicious of Class D amplification?

Jörn Janczak: I can see several reasons. Too often, it starts with "it cannot be good, so it shall not be good." It's an upfront decision we make in all aspects of life. Otherwise, we would all be happy to try, for example, indigo blue soup, advertised as "the best soup ever made." Stereotypes prevent us from believing it in the first place. I understand that clients have spent lots and lots of money and have built a connection to brands, technologies, etc. This does not change overnight. Maybe so-so experiences with Class D amps did not exactly boost and spread the idea of the technology either. I can only say that audio technologies or materials alone indicate nothing about the result.

What do you hear as audible problems with a typical switching amplifier?

Typical ones sound dry to me, a bit harsh and unnatural in the highs and midrange. They might wow on first impression with a crisp bass—but missing is the real-world blackness, control, and weight. We analyzed the reasons for the downsides of this technology—every technology has upsides and downsides—and thought about how we could overcome or reduce them.

Why did you decide to design the Intra as a Class D amplifier? Was it to meet a price point?

We've never designed a device for a certain budget and never will. The whole idea was a power amplifier that was only as big as our preamps and sources and to make it in this size for our clients who do not want to waste space and yet want the best possible sound. We learned many things from our Tidal-for-Bugatti project, and even if the inside of the Intra is a different solution and a strongly downscaled concept in detail and execution, the technology itself [Class D amplification] showed us with the Royale that it just needs to be unleashed and treated the right way.

I am sure your magazine awarded the Royale "Best Sound (cost-no-object)" at the 2023 Munich show for a valid reason—and what you heard was Class D through and through. But in that case, it comes at a hefty price, and it can't yet be transferred into a classic power-amp cabinet. Someday, we might offer the Royale power-amp technology inside some mono amplifiers to replace our huge Assoluta power amps. Be assured, we would make it better, even if it were smaller. That the Intra is small, powerful, versatile, easy to use, and very efficient should be welcomed because the main reason it exists is to be a fine stereo amplifier.

Surprisingly, I learned this from comparisons of the Contros/Intra combination to the Contros/Ferios, rather than by the substitution of another electronics brand. With the 109-pounds-per-side, $85,000-per-pair monoblocks sitting inches away from the 27-pound, $28,000 stereo amplifier, fairly immediate comparisons were possible and the Contros/Ferios dyad did manifest better dynamics, more extended bass, and superior tonal richness and dimensionality. Given the price differential, they'd better. But the two products were, to me, equals in terms of transparency—both offered a crystal-clear view of the original event, when the recording made it possible to do so.

In a real sense Tidal Audio found me, rather than the other way around, and I've not looked back.

The Contros digital controller and Intra stereo amplifier—the Contros, in particular—are undeniably expensive. I get that, and so does Jörn Janczak: The website notes that Tidal has developed a constituency with "both the discrimination *and financial means necessary* [emphasis mine] to satisfy their exacting standards of sound reproduction." A focus for Janczak has been to educate well-off individuals who may not have paid any attention to the audiophile pursuit that his products exist and can emotionally reward an investment in much the same way as a bespoke Panama hat, a subscription to the Metropolitan Opera, or a Bugatti can. Although I'd never go so far to suggest that anything in Tidal's line is a bargain, the two items considered here do offer good value, at least by high-end standards. If you don't need analog, the Contros subsumes the key functionality of three other Tidal products (the Prisma preamp, Camira DAC, and Arkas streamer) that together cost much more. The $28,000 Intra delivers 75% of the overall performance—and 100% of the transparency—of far costlier single-channel amplifiers available from this manufacturer, and in a package that's considerably smaller than Tidal's monoblock offerings.

In a real sense Tidal Audio found me, rather than the other way around, and I've not looked back. The Contros controller and Ferios amplifiers haven't disappointed with any loudspeaker I've used with them, and I doubt the Intra would either. Try to hear this brand of electronics (and speakers) at an audio show if possible—Doug White makes it to many of them. But if you do, lock your doors and windows when you get home. Once you've made the acquaintance of Tidal components, they may come looking for *you*. tas

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The Best Subwoofer Is No Subwoofer

Rives Bird

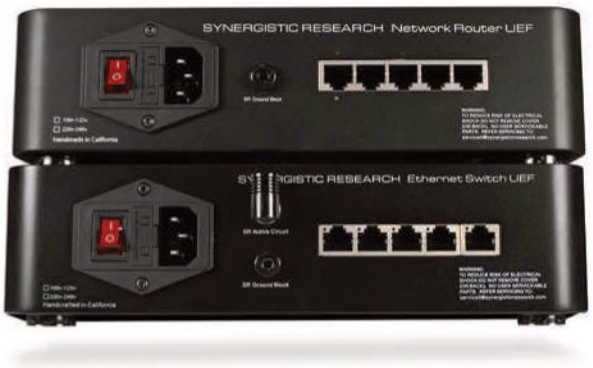
Subwoofers are great for home theater. They make the walls and floor shake and give the audience that visceral feel as depth charges from *U-571* explode. I love a good action movie as much as anyone, and my requirement is simple: Something has to blow up. I want to feel it as much as see it. There are a lot of subwoofers out there that can accomplish this. Not much finesse here, just brute force. Subwoofers were introduced into the home market for this purpose alone. They were not integrated into a high-end two-channel system. When attempted, the result was typically degradation of sound quality rather than enhancement. There were a couple of reasons for this. First, the subwoofers were designed to go boom, not convincingly play the bottom octave of an upright bass. Second, home-theater processors were designed for an LFE (low-frequency effects) output from the movie mix. This second point started to change, though, and manufacturers of home-theater processors added settings for integrating the subwoofer with two-channel audio playback. It still sounded terrible, because the subwoofers and processing had not yet evolved to convincingly integrate the subwoofer(s) with the main speakers. Suffice to say, in these early days it was very easy to hear that a subwoofer was added—usually not in a good way.

I recall being at CEDIA in 2004 when JL Audio was entering the home market. Its technology and build-quality were already impressive for a newcomer, but in a way, they really weren't that new. JL Audio had been around since 1975 and was rooted in the car-audio industry. The car-audio folks held some crazy competitions to push the limits of what could be done, one being SPL drag racing. It required holding a tone for 5 seconds. The world record was 185.4dB. I've heard of companies using Volvos with reinforced doors and special glass to achieve those kinds of SPLs. No one is in the car when these competitions happen, as their ears would bleed out—literally. Knowing this and seeing the very impressive drivers at the JL booth made it a sure thing that its product could go BOOM! At the time I wondered how well a car-audio manufacturer would do in the home-audio industry.

While I was running my former company, Rives Audio, we had a number of clients using JL subwoofers, but at the time it was all for home theater. None of them were using the JL subs for two-channel music. Those that were doing two channels were "purists" and would not consider the blasphemy of adding a subwoofer to their high-end audio system. Times have changed.

So, Who Is JL Audio?

Since its inception in 1975, JL has expanded from car audio to marine and mobile sports and most recently, in 2004, to home audio. I had the pleasure of speaking with Brett Hanes and Doug Henderson of JL Audio. Brett is VP of Acoustic Research and in charge of IP for JL Audio, where he has worked since 1994. Doug joined JL in 2018, as Senior VP of Home Audio. He has an impressive background with several positions in home audio, including President of B&W for North America.



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I had to know where the JL came from. The J is Jim Birch who cofounded JL Audio, while the L is Lucio Proni. Lucio was the technical brains, with a background in car audio, and he remains highly involved in product development. Jim has pivoted into an HR role which is significant for a company that now employs 700 people in three separate offices from Washington state to Florida.

JL's journey in the home market is one of purposeful evolution. It has, of course, leveraged some of the technology developed for the car market, but the challenges of home audio are quite different. One distinct advantage car audio gave them was very robust design parameters. The car market tends to be rather abusive on speakers and, in particular, subwoofers. Looking at a JL subwoofer certainly leaves the impression of robust overbuilding. But the advantage doesn't stop there.

In 2004, when it entered the home market, JL made all its own drivers. It currently holds 45 patents on subwoofer technology. Its woofers have the robust build-quality mentioned, with motors capable of maintaining linearity at all volume levels. JL's introduction into the home market was the Fathom subwoofer, including the Gotham. These were powered subs with analog amplification. JL increased its product offerings in 2013 with the E-Subs, which had a unique driver topology: The front panel is part of the driver. This sub also had JL's first switching power supply. Also in 2013, JL introduced its IWS (In-Wall Sub), both the single and dual models. The IWS takes a unique approach to the category in that the enclosure hangs in the wall cavity like a pendulum. The natural frequency for the pendulum is around 2–3Hz, so it does not have any effect on the sound quality but does eliminate interaction with the wall. The Dominion line of subwoofers was introduced in 2015 as a lower-cost version of the E-Sub. In 2017, JL introduced an 8-inch version in the IWS line.

Suffice to say that JL Audio continues to develop new products but at a reasonable cadence. Its developments are real, not just a new look or upgrade claim. These are significant additions and changes, but the one that I think may be the most significant is the introduction of the Fathom V2 line. The V2's most important change is the digital processing. JL went from an analog parametric EQ to Digital Automatic Room Optimization (DARO). This is an 18-band digital equalizer that can be automatically calibrated in a matter of minutes with the included microphone. Given my background in room acoustics and low-frequency equalization, I was very keen to put DARO to the test and measure the results with the Rives Audio BARE (Bass and Room Evaluator) software.

Problems to Be Solved for High-End Two-Channel Integration

Before getting into the details of setup, it's important to understand the challenges of integrating a subwoofer (or two) into a high-end two-channel system. First is the subwoofer itself. What kind of transient response will it have compared to the speakers it will be mated to? Sealed enclosures can suffer from significant vacuum and resistance on the driver, causing a slow response time. Ported enclosures, on the other hand, can have turbulence when moving so much air through the port. JL Audio wanted to create as small a box as possible with high output and chose a sealed enclosure and lots of power. This is one reason it chose an analog amplifier with a traditional power supply. Most will think this is a bit odd for a subwoofer, but it's very difficult to build a switching amplifier capable of the high output needed for this configuration. While the f110v2 only uses 1.1kW, the f113v2 has a 3kW amplifier and the Gotham a 4kW one.

The second issue has to do with integration. How does this different speaker integrate seamlessly with high-end main speakers when it has a different driver, different amplifier, and different placement in the room? Ideally, we would like the subwoofer to disappear, integrating so well that you don't even realize that a subwoofer(s) has been added to the sys-

Specs & Pricing

Enclosure type: Sealed
Enclosure finish: Black gloss
Frequency response: 27–111Hz (±1.5dB); –3dB at 25Hz; –10dB at 19Hz
Effective piston area: 60 sq in.
Effective displacement: 160 cu in.
Amplifier power: 1.1kW short-term
Inputs: Balanced and single-ended, mono or stereo
Level control: Reference (fixed) or variable
Filter slopes: 12/24dB/octave
Polarity: 0/180 degrees
Phase: Variable, 0–280 degrees
Extremely low frequency trim: Variable, –12dB to +3dB at 28Hz
Dimensions: 12.92" x 12.92" x 17.27"
Price: $4000 each

JL Audio
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tem. Most would agree that this becomes more difficult with faster-responding mains speakers (think planar speakers, like Magnepan or MartinLogan). The difficulty continues to increase as the crossover frequency between the mains and subwoofer is increased.

Setup

Two subwoofers are far easier to integrate than one. I had previously used a larger single subwoofer with my system. One disadvantage is that the subwoofer has to be in mono and in my setup cannot be centrally located. While it worked well in terms of providing those lower notes, it was audibly an extra speaker and not completely blended with the mains. In previous systems, I had two subwoofers near the main speakers, dedicated to the left and right channels to complement each speaker. This worked far better.

I expected integrating two f110 subwoofers would be much easier than integrating the single sub I had, and to some degree this was true. However, this does require integrating two devices, so there is more time involved. Honestly, the JL subwoofers required a little more time and attention to get them set up as accurately as possible. This was in part because I could not place them symmetrically due to room and space constraints.

Before beginning a more intensive setup, I did a basic setup by ear, and let the subwoofers burn in for about a week. During that time, I kept reducing the volume, and I suspect internal resistance was reduced over time, thereby increasing the overall efficiency and output of the subwoofer.

JL Audio has a very good white paper on set-up procedures, and I'll summarize the process. The first step is simple: Use the JL supplied microphone and cable to calibrate each subwoofer independently in the room. Plug it in, place the microphone at the listener position, and press calibrate. Two minutes of low-frequency noises, and, *voila*, the JL DARO system has calibrated the subwoofer to the room.

The next step involves integrating the subwoofer to the main speakers. Using one channel at a time, select the crossover frequency. I'm using Talon Hawks as mains, which use Accuton drivers and a labyrinth design to increase efficiency and transient response. This configuration is very fast and will definitely present a challenge in integrating subwoofers. The Talons roll-off pretty sharply around 35Hz, so this is where I brought the subs in. The second step is to set the levels of each speaker (meaning the sub and main for one channel) at the crossover frequency to 80Hz. Well, I didn't have a 35Hz track, so I used tone-generator software on my computer, which worked well. The next step is to set the variable-polarity knob to zero and invert the polarity to 180 degrees via a switch. Then from the listening chair with a tone at the crossover frequency playing (and this is where I had to get creative with some other software) rotate the polarity very slowly until you get a null. This requires two people, one listening and one turning the knob. Or in my case, one person, as I used a microphone and some test equipment. Once you find the null, you will then switch the polarity switch back to zero.

This procedure makes sense, and it also takes into account any latency that might exist in filtering or processing. Thus, it's not enough to merely calculate the distance variations and fraction of wavelength to assign a polarity value. After I was done, I used the Rives Audio BARE software to verify the results. Frankly I was shocked at how flat the response was down to 20Hz on the left channel and

nearly flat with a slight roll-off on the right channel. I've measured a lot of speakers and subwoofers in a lot of rooms, and this was really impressive.

Listening: "The Best Subwoofer Is No Subwoofer"

This is one of the classic arguments in high-end audio. Subwoofers always call attention to themselves, which is fine for action movies, but not okay for two-channel music. I've done demonstrations at tradeshows with subs that were made by the same manufacturer and was able to integrate the subs so completely that people did not believe there was a subwoofer…until I turned the sub off. That was the "wow" factor. All the sound seemed to be coming solely from the main speakers, but once the subs were turned off, the bottom end was lost.

I decided to start with possibly the most difficult piece of music—Eberhard Weber's "Concerto for Bass" on *Endless Days*, an ECM recording that's exceptional. The harmonics and resonance traverse the crossover point, and it's a piece I use regularly to expose non-linearities in low-frequency crossover points. The system sounded like a pair of speakers that were full and much larger than they actually are. The integration was exactly what I wanted. This sounded like there was no subwoofer, until you turned it off. With the subs off, the presentation was lean and uninviting.

While that piece was great, it does not have any transients in it. I used several pieces to test for transient performance—Janis Ian's "Tattoo," Jennifer Warnes "Way Down Deep," Holly Cole's "One Trick Pony," and Jane Monheit's "Honey Suckle Rose." All have challenging bass riffs, and all of these were reproduced convincingly. There was no way to detect the location of the subs or even if they were playing, but what was notable aside from the added extension and output of the bass was the entire presentation. Consistently, the soundstage was far wider than had previously been the case, and the instrument location and timbre, even those instruments clearly well above the crossover point, were all more realistic.

Conclusion

The JL Audio f110v2 subwoofers punch well above their weight class. That such a small package can integrate with such speed, finesse, and low-frequency extension is remarkable. Every piece of music I threw at the subs demonstrated improvement in all aspects, not just those one would associate with a sub. The soundstage improved, placement of instruments improved, and overall musicality was transformed in a way far beyond my expectations. If you have speakers that are just not up to the low-frequency task, like many monitors and planars, and want musicality that does not degrade the sound quality—look no further. JL has the answer. tas

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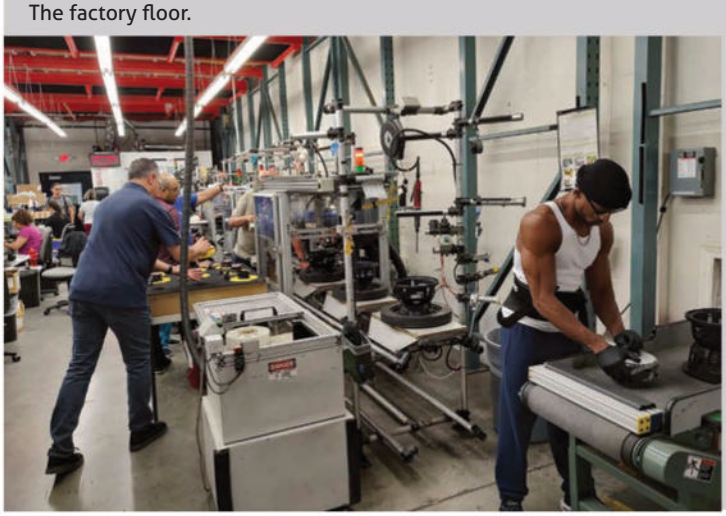
JL Audio Factory Tour

JL Audio's 240,000-square-foot headquarters.

WHEN I ARRIVED at JL Audio's headquarters I was greeted by Steve Turrisi and Doug Henderson for what I was anticipating would be a most interesting factory visit. Steve led the tour and began down a hallway of photographs of the people at JL Audio. While there were, of course, the typical photos of the founders and president of JL Audio, most of the photographs were candid shots of the people in the factory. There were some really great ones from Halloween. They seem to take Halloween very seriously. I'm wondering if they'll have Rob Zombie visit their next Halloween party. The photographs were important. Steve described JL Audio as really a "mom and pop" operation. Well, if it is mom and pop, its parents were very efficient at procreation: JL Audio employs nearly 700 people! All kidding aside, as we went through the factory, Steve and Doug were constantly reaching out to people on floor giving fist bumps and hugs and calling them by name. The company culture is, no doubt, one of family, which is highly commendable for a firm that has grown so much so quickly.

Well, 700 people need a lot of space to work, and while we were only visiting one of the three buildings in the area (and certainly not the operation in Phoenix or Washington), this one was still 240,000 square feet. I was happy that I wore extra comfortable shoes that day. We entered the factory in the car-audio production area, which is apropos, as that is where JL Audio's roots are. There was a combination of cabinets, mostly for subwoofers, including custom fiberglass molded boxes for JL's Stealth product line. These were specific for particular car/truck models. JL makes the molds or wood cabinets, covers them in fabric, and then installs the drivers and connectors. It also makes an impressive rooftop for four-wheelers like Polaris, with four speakers integrated into the roof for easy installation. I did not ask the price, but judging by the size and finish it would certainly be formidable.

The factory floor.



JL Audio is almost completely vertically integrated. It does buy some components, and some electronics are made by an overseas partner, but by in large everything else is done in-house. This includes the millwork, fiberglass molding, finishes (from high-gloss paint to carpet-covered), to building its own drivers for car audio, marine audio, and, of course, home audio. Many people may know that the integration of car audio from an OEM perspective has gotten much stronger, and as a result the aftermarket car-audio business that JL Audio is in has been diminishing for quite a few years. This has not been an issue for JL, as it has reduced the competition in that market. At the same time, JL Audio has become the dominant player in the marine-audio industry. It has contracts with many of the top boat builders and provides their OEM audio. Today, about one-half of JL's business is from the marine sector.

The tour was extensive, and I really can't thank Steve and Doug enough for their hospitality. Because there was so much to see, I'm going to stick to the highlights. One would certainly be the fiberglass shop. JL makes all its own molds and forms all the fiberglass in-house. Most of it is for the Stealth product line mentioned, but it's also used in home audio for the Gotham subwoofer (see photo on p. 132). The cabinets are remarkably thick and heavy. (There's certainly not going to be a cabinet vibration issue with this kind of mass.) These cabinets are painted and finished in-house to exacting standards. I can tell you from experience, high-gloss automotive finishes on cabinets like these are not easy to apply. They require a high level of skill to do well, and JL's cabinets look fantastic.

While I won't go into each production line (there are so many), I will discuss some of the commonalities I observed. All of them are clearly efficient. Every workstation has a computer with the work instructions on it. Every line has a job number, target, and tally of actual output. This company is goal driven at every level from quality to efficiency. Achieving both in a high-volume operation is challenging, to say the least. JL has invested in building

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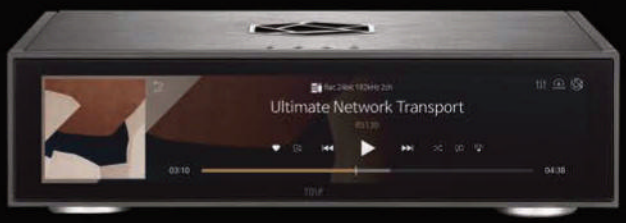

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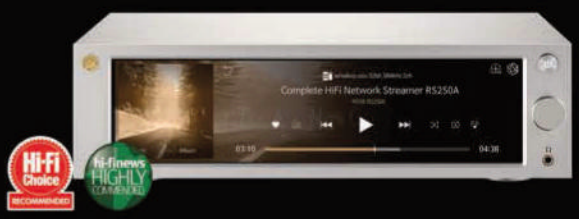

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Marine driver assembly.

Doug Henderson with the Gotham.

its own lines from scratch (see photo of marine driver assembly line), including all the tooling needed to make assembly efficient and reproducible. In some cases, robotics further increase reproducibility, and I imagine this trend will continue in the future.

The marine line is interesting because of the abuse its products are required to take. Salt water is not kind to speakers or electronics, so extra care in design and construction must be taken. JL used to use the top of the building as its test bed. A storm, along with lots of UV light, would help it spot deficiencies and know if the product was going to hold up. The test facility has since evolved into an environmental chamber, where saltwater mist can be created. If JL can do this, it should be able to make a pretty decent outdoor speaker for the home. And so, it has. The Pavilion line is just that, with multiple concentric-driver speakers for your outdoor patio or deck.

Final assembly and testing of all "W7" home products is done in a separate space. The "7" denotes JL's highest-end line. The "W" is for home products. JL has seven levels of complexity. The top level requires 70 steps to complete a driver. In this final-assembly area, there are stations to test electronics, drivers, and results, including ensuring that the D.A.R.O. (Digital Automatic Room Optimization) is working properly. JL also does final inspection of the cosmetics, making sure that the paint is blemish free and that all hardware is tight and secure. Just outside this area is packing. JL does not want anything happening to its beautiful completed products by trying to move them too far for packaging. Smart move there.

The final stop on our tour was the machine shop, which is mostly used for prototyping. JL has military-grade CNC machines for metals—some with and without water baths. These machines are monsters. I could not even photograph the entire housing. I asked about delivery of such a massive system and was told that it took two forklifts and cracked the foundation of the building. After the install, the machines were inspected by the government, as they truly are military grade and could be utilized in the event of war.

As we finished up in the machine shop, I looked at my watch, figuring we had been going for maybe an hour. I was shocked to see it was already noon. We had been at it for two and a half hours. The tour was so interesting that I had no idea of time passing.

JL Audio is truly a gem in our industry. Like most companies, it started modestly but has grown into one of the largest manufacturers in our industry. The founders are still an active part of the company, and the culture remains one of family. tas

Team spirit is apparent on the production line.

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The Progression integrated amplifier from Dan D'Agostino Master Audio Systems is an outstanding option both in terms of its audio performance and its compact size. It is a smaller version of the D'Agostino Momentum integrated amplifier and one of the best integrated approaches to putting every critical element of high-end audio electronics into one unit that I've yet auditioned.

Making the High End Nearly Invisible

The high sound quality of the Progression is its key merit, but anyone who is familiar with the problem some audiophiles encounter with their partners over the impact a high-end system can have on room décor know it is a real issue. Accordingly, let me begin by noting that the Progression manages to fit all its features—including two functional front-panel meters—into a unit that only measures 17.25 inches wide by 6.63 inches high by 20.13 inches deep, although the quality of its componentry is indicated by the fact that it weighs some 57 pounds.

Coupled to its high sound quality, this means the $20,950 Progression can be the core of a far less intrusive high-end audio system. If you do choose to display it where it can be seen, its styling its quietly excellent, and its superior heatsinks mean that it is easy to place on almost any shelf. At the same time, it is also the first component I've encountered that allows you to conveniently place all your electronics out of any line of sight. This is particularly true if you use its optional streamer and DAC ($7000). It has Bluetooth remote control with a usable range far greater than that of conventional IR remotes, which allows you to place the unit outside the line of sight. It also has an iPad application that can control the amp and select the music to stream. Via an innovative Wi-Fi application, you can control the Progression while selecting your music sources like Roon, Tidal, Qobuz, and Spotify in a single package of electronics that only requires that a computer running the Roon Core be connected to the network along with the Progression. This reduces the visibility of a high-end system to two speakers and speaker cables.

This kind of setup does mean you have to give up whatever status comes from owning a large and highly visible mix of separate high-end electronics. You won't have larger amps than the other audiophile kids on your block. You also won't see the two meters on the Progression's front panel, which are works of art in themselves.

At the same time, you can also keep visibility low without relying on streaming. You can hook up a separate DAC/digital-disc player, turntable, analog tape unit, and FM tuner in ways that also place them out of sight. The Progression has two single-ended inputs and three balanced inputs including a theater pass-through and an optional phono preamp. There are also balanced preamplifier outputs, which make for convenient inclusion of subwoofer(s) in a system. In practice, this allows you to conceal or minimize the visual impact of every component.

These features have a few quirks that I'll come to later in this review, but they can make the Progression the core of one of the most "décor-friendly" approaches to high-end sound that I know of, and this can matter with many wives and partners. I have all too much experience with non-audiophiles, who love to listen but don't like to look. We audiophiles may understand our passion for the high end, but let's face it: A good part of the world takes one look at a large high-end system and concludes that they want to live without one.

The Sonic Case for an Integrated Amp

At the same time, I should stress that there is a strong technical case for an integrated amplifier like the Progression that has nothing to do with its visual impact. It is also one of the few integrated amps whose high-level inputs

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Specs & Pricing

Output power: 200Wpc into 8 ohms, 400Wpc into 4 ohms
Output impedance: 0.1 ohm
Analog inputs: 4 stereo pairs of balanced XLR, 2 stereo pairs of single-ended RCA
Digital inputs (w/DAC module installed): 1 USB-B type, 1 optical, 1 SPDIF, 1 coaxial, 1 Wi-Fi, Ethernet RJ45,
Phono loading (w/phono module installed): 47k ohms, 10k ohms, 2k ohms, 1k ohm, 500 ohms, 200 ohms, 100 ohms, 50 ohms
Frequency response: 1Hz–80kHz, -0.5dB; 20Hz–20kHz, ±0.01dB
Signal-to-noise ratio: 95dB, unweighted; 75dB, A-weighted
Total harmonic distortion: 0.015% @ 1kHz at 200W into 8 ohms
Input impedance: 100k ohms
Outputs: 1 pr. balanced XLR stereo, 5-way speaker binding posts
Dimensions: 17.25" x 6.63" x 20.13"
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Price: $20,950–$30,100

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have sound quality that is good enough to show that an integrated amp can actually make full use of the potential advantages of integrated electronics over separate components.

These advantages are all too real. Integrating a streamer DAC, phono preamp, preamp, and power amp into one unit allows a manufacturer to create a design where the sonic nuances of all the electronics in the system can be "voiced" to have the same overall sound quality—something that is virtually impossible with separate components. As every high-end audiophile has already discovered, the potential advantages of such an integrated approach are all too audible when you try to blend the different "voices" and sonic nuances of each electronic component to get fully coherent sound quality.

While separate electronic components have an obvious advantage in terms of quieter and more complex circuitry, add operating features, expand power-supply size, and advance other aspects of performance, size and complexity come at a cost. No individual component is ever sonically neutral, and each component has at least a slightly different mix of sonic nuances or "voicing." In practice, this means you have to evolve a system where the nuances of each electronic component in your system corrects or reinforces the nuances in another. This is particularly true when you try to blend separate components from different manufacturers, but I often hear significant differences in the voicing of components from the same manufacturer. Equally important, you do not need a Laocoön's worth of snaky interconnects—where each added interconnect also adds its own nuances to the sound of your system.

In most cases, a carefully blended system does sound better than an integrated amplifier, and there are many choices of mixed components that do sound as good or better—albeit at what is usually a higher cost. The Progression does, however, take a highly advanced approach to integrating all its circuitry. It minimizes the use of feedback. Unlike many of its rivals, the Progression uses discrete, balanced, direct-coupled circuits that filter RF noise from the AC powerline and compensate for asymmetric power waveforms and DC on the mains.

D'Agostino also states that the Progression has a 2000VA, high-current transformer with the same unique winding technology employed in its Momentum M400 amplifier. That transformer is the core of its power supply, feeding 24 complementary 15-amp silicon power transistors, each capable of 250V operation and delivering 200 watts of power

The end result is that I've found the Progression has enough power to deliver 200 watts of real musical power per channel into 8 ohms and 400 watts into 4 ohms. Specifications matter, but so does listening, and all too many separate power amps that I've auditioned measure well in technical terms but do not deliver the life, dynamic contrasts, and impact you want when you are actually listening to music. The Progression delivers all the musical power needed for use in even large and absorbent listening rooms, and its signal-to-noise ratio via its high-level inputs and optional streamer is truly excellent. Moreover, its heatsinks are so efficient that the Progression gets warm but never hot with anything approaching reasonable space around the amp. You can take visual advantage of its comparatively small size and excellent front-panel styling if you do want to display it in an area where it can be seen.

The Progression's Sound Quality

A detailed description of the sound quality of the Progression has to be divided into three different parts: First is its sound quality as an integrated amplifier using its high-level inputs; second is its sound using its optional streamer, and third is its sound using its optional phono preamp.

The sound of the amplifier and optional streamer are both nearly identical and very good to excellent. Their performance with low- to high-level dynamics was outstanding. So was its reproduction of musical detail and ability the reveal the differences between types of digital recording and levels of resolution.

The Progression did an excellent job of resolving detail and dynamics from low-level solo instruments and voices

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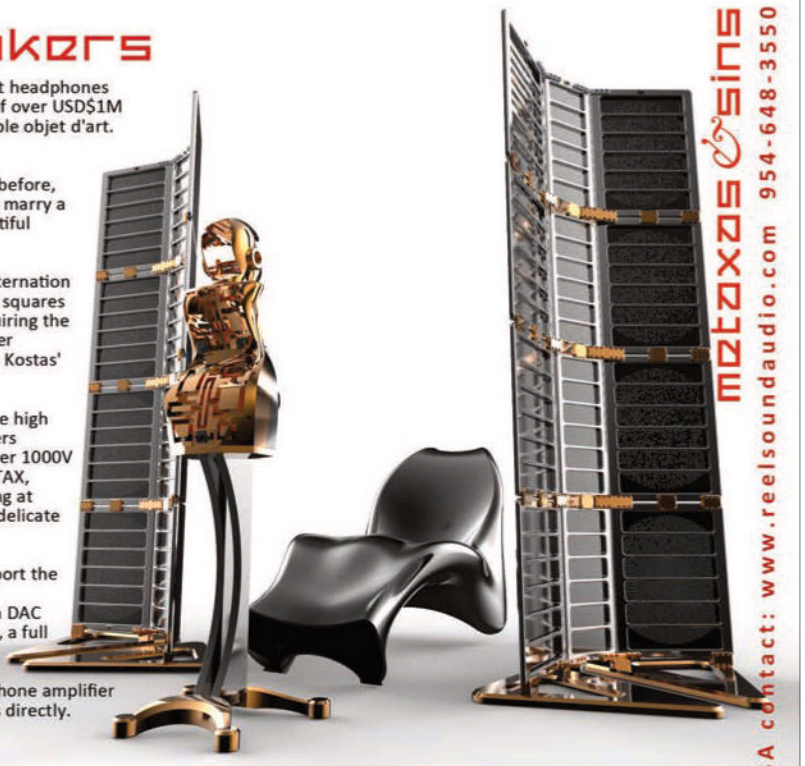

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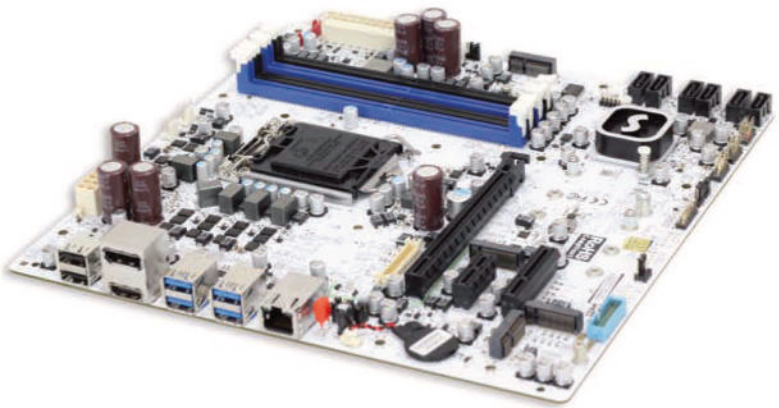

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By Audiophilestyle

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up to loud and complex challenges like Mahler's Eighth Symphony ("Symphony of 1000") and the final bands of Saint-Saën's Third ("Organ") Symphony. Its only audible limits were in delivering deep bass at frequencies below 40Hz, where you normally have to use a subwoofer to get the best results (and where room colorations usually dominate the sound).

As is true of the best high-end components today, there were no sonic nuances that significantly changed the sound of even the most challenging recordings, and no surprises or sudden "revelations" that indicated the electronics were altering the sound. The sonics and nuances of the recording came through, as did the nature of the miking and the venue (when the recording had a real soundstage). This was particularly clear in the cases where I have recordings made of live performances that I've actually attended and in venues I'm familiar with.

The music came though regardless of whether I listened to jazz, folk, rock, or classical. So did the extent to which a given recording revealed that it was assembled or modified and had low-level noise problems in the original source. And so did the increasingly minor differences imposed by the use of different high-end streaming services. Far too many components impose more of their own nuances than the Progression.

As for the details of voicing in timbre and soundstage with depth and image size, they were again minor. Overall timbre was very natural with excellent solo recordings of given instruments, small musical groups, and solo voice. If there was any particular character to the Progression's sound, it was that the transition from the bass to the midrange was as natural as the best recordings permit. This may sound slightly warm to some audiophiles, particularly since there seems to be a tendency to slightly raise upper midrange and lower treble in both recordings and equipment to provide more detail and apparent soundstage separation, but I prefer the natural warmth of musical instruments, and the last thing I want is even a touch of added hardness in strings, woodwinds, and brass.

The sound of the Progression is not "warm" in character like some tube or Class A units, but it is also not voiced to have a slight rise in apparent upper midrange and lower treble detail—something that I, as a classical music fan, can do without. I wouldn't call this choice in the Progression's voicing coloration but realism, and it does have the advantage of revealing a bit more depth where the recording is actually one with a real soundstage. In any case, I think that we reviewers tend to exaggerate the importance of some of these differences. They are far less apparent with top-quality, high-end electronics today than they were even a few years.

The sound of Progression's amplifier and streaming option also had another advantage I touched upon earlier. The amplifier and optional streamer are extremely quiet when there is no music playing, even at levels that were very loud when the music played. The only sound I heard from the streamer with no music playing was the faint noise I hear from some streaming services on all equipment with no music playing and the volume control set at high. I think we often understate the importance of this "silence" in terms of equipment and cable noise in reviews, but then I live in a separate house with a large yard and garden on a *cul de sac*. The sound of silence is golden in more than one sense given today's real estate prices.

And this brings me to my one major uncertainty about the Progression's sound The phono option ($2200) installed in my review sample was not as quiet at high listening levels with no music playing as it is with the best phono preamps, and the noise was slightly higher in the left channel than the right. This was true with the phono inputs shorted as well as with my turntable hooked up and regardless of whether its cable was grounded to the Progression's chassis.

I should stress that the musical sound quality of its phono option was still very good and matched the quality and voice of its high-level inputs and streaming option, and that the phono noise level was acceptably low when I was playing actual music. I should also note that far too many separate phono preamps have noise levels that equal that of the Progression's phono option. This may reflect my biases as a reviewer, but I've found that as the sound of streaming gets better and better, I have less and less tolerance for added noise from a phono preamp. Listening to the best records is still a great experience. Listening to noise from a phono preamp is not.

The Progression's phono preamp also has some features that make it harder to adjust to get the best results with some cartridges. It is not designed to be a universal phono preamp. It has a fixed 60dB gain rather than variable levels of gain and a fixed level of capacitive loading, although it does have a wide range of selectable resistance loads. I did ask the manufacturer to name some matching cartridges but did not receive a reply. Accordingly, I'd suggest you audition the phono option vary carefully and

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work with your dealer to get the best matching cartridge—one that has the sound character and nuances you desire—before you choose the phono option over a separate phono preamp.

Quibbles About Set-Up Instructions and Manuals

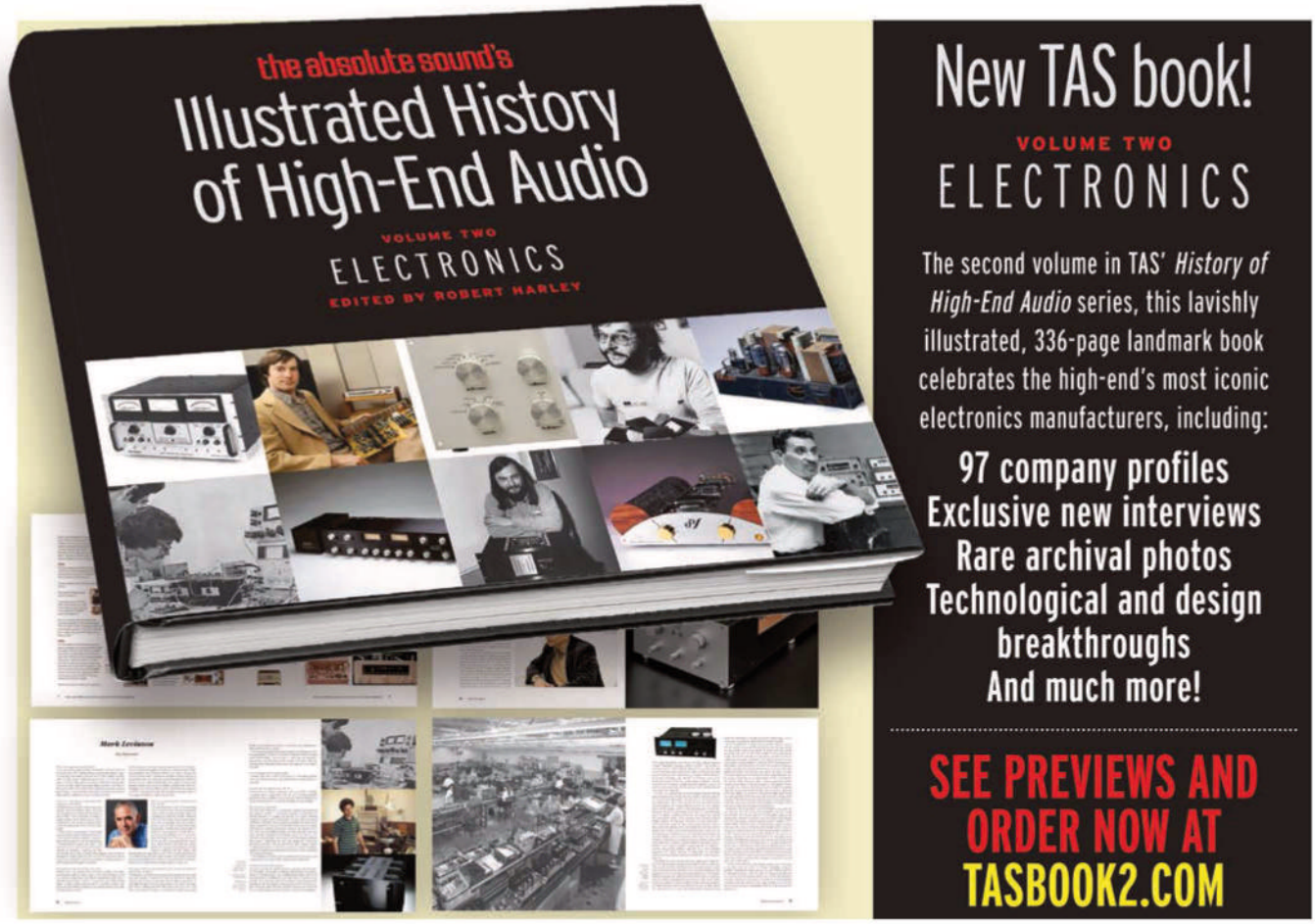
Finally, the owner's manual is well written and comprehensive, but not quite up to the user-friendly standard that this product deserves. In saying this, I don't mean to pick on the D'Agostino Progression alone. About half the high-end products that I get in for review have the same lack of separate set-up instructions and manuals that do not cover every contingency in a logical and explicit way. There certainly is no correlation between the quality of the instructions and the rising price of today's high-end equipment.

In fact, the Progression's instructions more than meet the standard set by most competing equipment. If anything, they have fewer poorly written commands and options and show fewer signs of being written by an expert who is so familiar with the equipment. These manual writers don't appreciate that a user who lacks this expertise may need more detail and attention about how to set up and operate a complex unit.

The Progression manual—complete as its coverage is in many respects—does not have a separate set of set-up instructions. It does not provide enough detail on the Progression's remote control and application features or warnings about possible problems if you do not use the right approach. Like virtually every other high-end component I have reviewed or set up in recent years, it does not fully explain how to optimize the unit for each major streaming service—many of which have instructions and web sites that are even more opaque than high-end equipment manuals. The entire high-end industry needs to do better, and like far too much in our new era of artificial intelligence, it needs to use ordinary consumers to test its manuals and instructions.

Summary Judgment

The Progression is a really high-quality audio product in virtually every respect. It is not cheap, however, and needs to be judged accordingly. The Progression alone costs $20,950. The optional streamer costs $7000, and the optional phono unit costs $2200. I believe the integrated amp and streamer option are well worth their price in competitive terms. I'd be more cautious about the phono preamp option. Its overall sound quality is very good, but cartridge compatibility and preamp noise level may be issues, and I advise listening carefully to the phono-preamp option before including it and to work closely with your dealer to choose a cartridge and approach to connecting and grounding your turntable that produces the best results. tas



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A NEW REFE

Soulution 727 Preamplifier

By Jonathan Valin

Photos by Matt Wrightsteel

V
RENCE

I first heard about Soulution (the name is a concatenation of "soul" and "solution") from solid-state amp/preamp maven and loudspeaker-designer Alon Wolf way back in 2008. At the time, I knew nothing about the brand, and when I looked it up on-line and discovered it was owned by another Swiss company called Spemot that specialized in building electrical motors and refrigeration units for the automotive industry, I was not enthralled. Shades of Crown, thought I. Then I chanced upon a rave review of a Soulution product—the 120Wpc dual-mono Soulution 710 stereo amp—in the tough-minded German hi-fi magazine *Stereo* and got more interested.

You see *Stereo* had pronounced the 710 a sonic and technological *wunderkind*. Indeed, the amp had tested so unprecedentedly low in distortion, so high in channel separation, so superbly well in S/N ratio that the magazine's chief technician hung the test results in a gold frame above his bench.

Of course, some of us (at least some who go back that far) remembered those Japanese solid-state amps from Sansui and others that also boasted record-low THD figures—but sounded like crap. The trouble was that to achieve such stellar specs the Japanese engineers had to ladle on so much global negative feedback that their amps were virtual TIM (transient intermodulation distortion) and SID (slew-induced distortion) generators. Feeding back the signal from the output in order to compare it to the signal at the input (and thus fix any errors that may have accrued as it made its way through the circuit) works fine if that feedback process is instantaneous, but feedback is a disaster if the amp takes too long to make its corrections. After all, the musical signal coming into the amplifier doesn't hold still for a portrait; it is constantly changing; and if too much time elapses (and we're talking nanoseconds here), the signal that the feedback circuit is comparing at the output is no longer the same signal that is being seen at the input. Ever since the "specs wars" of the late Sixties, the received wisdom about solid-state has been that negative feedback is a bad thing—only to be applied sparingly and locally—while shorter signal paths and fewer parts are good ones.

With its original 7 Series electronics, Soulution turned this conventional thinking on its ear. In concert with the company's owner, chief engineer, and CEO, Cyrill Hammer, Soulution's design team decided that it wasn't feedback itself but the speed at which the feedback loop operated that was the problem.

To eliminate the time-related distortion—the blur, graininess, and edginess that feedback engenders—you had to make those feedback loops correct errors instantaneously. This meant that circuits and power supplies had to operate at incredibly high speeds (which translates into incredibly high bandwidths) and with very high precision. Forgetting about shorter signal paths and fewer parts (the 710 amplifier used over 3000 discrete components!), Soulution found ways to do this very thing, reducing propagation delay times (the amount of elapsed time it takes to

correct a signal via feedback) to 5–10 *nano*seconds (billionths of a second), where solid-state amps and preamps typically had propagation delay times of 1–5 *micro*seconds (millionths of a second). This thousand-fold increase in speed allowed for a huge increase in local negative feedback (and a drastic lowering of THD levels), without the usual price paid in time-domain errors.

The measured results of Soulution's ingenious, high-speed, high-local-feedback circuit were phenomenal. In the 710 stereo amp, for example, THD was well below 0.0006%, signal-to-noise ratio well above 108dB, damping factor greater than 10,0000, slew rate 330V/ns, while power bandwidth went from DC to 1MHz. (The 700 monoblock amps measured substantially better!)

The sonic results were just as astounding. Suddenly you could hear… *everything*, and hear it with unprecedented clarity, speed, and neutrality.

I will never forget my first listen to the Soulution 710 stereo amplifier and 720 preamp. It just so happened that, at the time, I was using most finely detailed transducer I'd reviewed, the then brand-new (now defunct) MartinLogan CLX electrostats. In concert, that amp and preamp and those speakers set a standard of transparency and resolution that had never before been approached and has never since been equaled in my system. The sheer number of previously inaudible details about the performance, the music, the venue, and the engineering they brought to light on record after record—and these were records I thought I knew by heart—was simply mind-boggling.

Hearing exactly how, oh, Joni Mitchell's vocal harmonies on *Blue* had been separately recorded in a sound booth and then potted into the mix to create a plethora of Jonis in the background (backing up Joni in the foreground) simply thrilled the "fidelity-to-sources" listener in me, for whom the experience was like peering over the shoulder of the recording engineer and observing how he'd mixed the various tracks down to two-channel work parts. However, I could also see where so much "non-musical" detail might be off-putting to a listener for whom the color and drama of music comes first. After all, not everyone wants to watch the man behind the curtain twiddling dials and adjusting sliders each time he sits down to enjoy his favorite tunes.

Indeed for some listeners (not me, mind you) the 710's presentation *was* overly "analytical"—dread word—in that it revealed artifices (like tape splices, mike preamp clipping, and overdubs, as well as every mechanical noise that a musical instrument is capable of making when it is played close by the diaphragm of a microphone) that other, less neutral and transparent amps and preamps glossed over and that the musicians and recording and mastering engineers probably didn't want or intend you to hear so plainly. While I reveled in this wealth of detail for all the previously unheard subtleties it revealed and for the greater sense of realism such completeness brought to well-recorded sources, some members of my little listening panel weren't so sanguine. A few of them felt that the 710 and 720—particularly in combination with the CLXes—were just a bit *too* revealing.

Moreover, it could be argued (and was in other mags) that the 710 and 720's super-high resolution was being purchased at a cost in lifelike density of tone color. Even a fan like me had to admit that listening through it did require a bit of a sonic adjustment. The 710 and 720 were not electronics one would ever call warm and inviting—or cold and off-putting, for that matter. They just didn't have a color of their own; like glass or water they had the color of what you saw through them or reflected by them, be that the source or the speakers. Some critics (and some on my listening panel) chose to view this colorlessness as the *absence* of tone color, and by tube or tube-hybrid amplifier standards, the amp and preamp were lean in the all-important midbass and power range, where so much of music's drive, body, and tonal warmth originate.

My bottom-line conclusion about the 710 and 720 was that if you were "absolute sound" or "fidelity-to-source" listeners, the duo was a no-brainer must-hear. However, if you preferred an inherently warmer, richer, more *gemütlich* sound, then Soulution's 7 Series products probably wouldn't be your cup of resistors and capacitors.

That's where things stood until 2014, when Cyrill Hammer introduced his second-generation Soulution 7 Series components—the 701 monoblocks, 711 stereo amplifier, and 725 preamplifier.

I will never forget my first listen to the Soulution 710 stereo amplifier and 720 preamp.

Though identical to their forebears on the outside—both were housed in the same gun-metal grey, Bauhaus-style chassis that Soulution used for the 710 amp and 720 preamp, with the same little rectangular windows inset in their faceplates for the LED readout screen that allowed you, via the remote or control knobs on the units themselves, to select various options—inside, there was one big difference. Oh, the 711 and 725 used the exact same high-speed, high-negative-feedback circuits found in their 7 Series predecessors, but the 711's power supply was completely new.

Like Soulution's 501 monoblocks which preceded it to market, the 711 dual-mono stereo amplifier used two, fully regulated, switched-mode power supplies (as well as several linear supplies for certain sub-systems), and it used these SMPSes for the same reasons they were employed in Soulution's 501 amp—to keep "the voltage to the amplifier channels perfectly constant irrespective of the music signals."

The use of these SMPSes had certain beneficial side benefits beyond providing cleaner, nearly inexhaustible power. For instance, because an SMPS runs cooler (which permits it to create higher voltages), Soulution was able to omit the 710's noisy cooling fans. In addition, since SMPSes allow for much more efficient power-factor correction (PFC), the supplies no longer polluted the mains with harmonics and current spikes, as linear supplies could and do, improving the performance of the amp itself and of ancillary electronics that were also plugged into the wall.

Furthermore, the smaller size of the SMPSes allowed a more efficient arrangement of parts and boards inside the amp, reducing the lengths of cable that had to be used between and among them, thus making for shorter signal paths. Finally, when these much more stable and efficient, lower-noise, higher-output SMPSes were paired with 1,000,000 microfarads of custom-made ultra-low-ESR capacitors (as they were in the 711), current peaks, particularly in the bass, could be reproduced with greater ease and fidelity, and current delivery could be raised from 60A to 120A (although pulling that much current from wall outlets was impossible in most homes).

What this translated to sonically was almost exactly the same thing that it had translated to in the 501 monoblocks and 520 preamp—electronics with simply unparalleled bass-range power, color, and impact, a power range and midrange of exceptional warmth and tonal beauty, and a treble that was as liquid, edgeless, and delicately detailed as any I'd heard from solid-state. The 711 stereo amplifier and 725 preamp were every bit as gorgeous, thrillingly dynamic, startlingly lifelike (given the right sources), and seemingly inexhaustible as the superb 501 and 520. Indeed, they might have been just a shade more inexhaustible (if that isn't a solecism), in that they didn't ultimately give up the ghost and shut down, no matter how loudly you played them. In addition to their inexhaustibility, the 711 and 725 had much the same marvelous (and extremely lifelike) sonic stability as the 5 Series mono-

The sound of the 711 and 725 was gorgeous, thrillingly dynamic, and very lifelike.

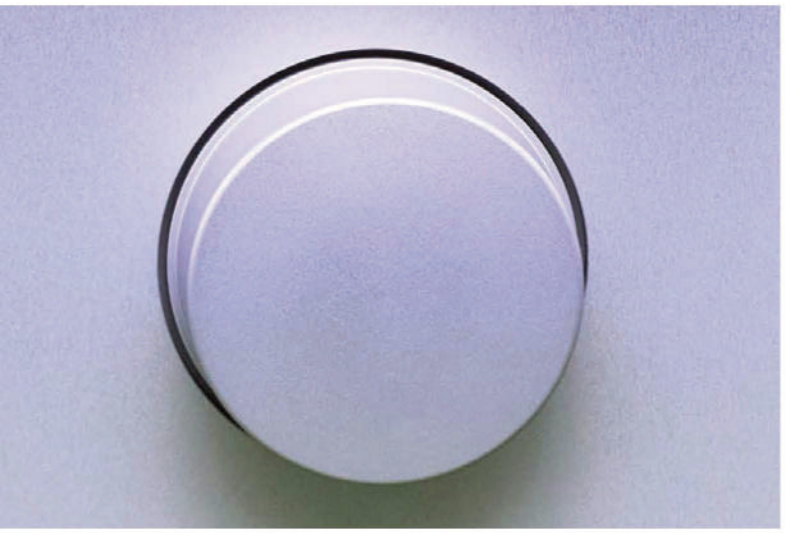
blocks and preamp—sounding virtually the same at very low levels as they did at ear-splittingly high ones.

So far, I described an amp and preamp that had the same virtues as less expensive ones. But the truth was that the 711 and the 725 had a leg up on the 501 and 520 in every area in which the less-pricey amp and preamp excelled; plus, the second-gen 7 Series components did certain things more than a leg better than the 5 Series gear. First, there was the sheer amount of information about performers and performance that the 711 and 725 delivered. While the 501 and 520 were extremely detailed, they were no Soulution 710 or 720 when it came to low- and high-level resolution. The 711 and 725 nearly were. To hear the effortless way this amp and preamp sorted out strings, winds, brass, and percussion (and individual players within each section) even on the most floor-shaking *fortississimos* of a terrifically busy and dynamic piece like the *Feria* of Ravel's *Rapsodie espagnole* was to hear a huge symphony orchestra reproduced with so much of the limitless ease and air, dense and variegated tone color, and thrilling acoustical power of a real orchestra in a real hall that it sent chills down your spine and goosebumps up your arms.

Prior to the second-generation 7 Series products, I thought the Soulution 501 and 520 were unbeatable in the low end. But in all my life I'd never heard Fender bass lines, kickdrums, and toms reproduced by an amplifier with as much lifelike speed, color, power, authority, and effortless ease as they were through the 711 and 725. Listeners literally came out of their chairs when they heard the tremendous impact of Chris Frantz's sledgehammer drumming at the end of "Life During Wartime" or Tina Weymouth's fat, throbbing, incredibly powerful bass intro to "Take Me to The River" from Talking Head's *Stop Making Sense* (recently re-released by Sire in a two-LP set with much improved sonics). Outside of an actual rock, big jazz band, or symphonic concert, I'd never heard anything like this amp and preamp in the bottom octaves. If nothing else, they were benchmarks in the bass and power range, capable of unrivaled slam, inexhaustible dynamic range, and ravishing tonal color.

So, what did the 711 and 725 not do? Well, they weren't as colorlessly neutral as the 710 and 720. Like the 501, the 711 and 725 had a big, dark, tremendously authoritative, bottom-up sound. They were also a bit softer than life in the top octaves. Nor were they as high in resolution as the 710 and 720. While very detailed and superb on transients, the 711 and 725 were not the sonic vacuum cleaners that the originals were. Though they had an astonishing measure of the three-dimensional bloom that I associated with tube amps (Soulution amps are almost unique among solid-state components in this regard), they didn't have quite the same lifelike midband presence of glass bottles; nor did they have the pitch-perfect steady-state tone that tubes can generate in the midrange. When it came to soundstaging and imaging, the 711 and 725 were also a bit reminiscent of tube amps and preamps, in that the stage was wall-to-wall vast, while instrumental images within that stage were less razor-cut and more life-sized than they were through most other solid-state amplifiers. (Once again, this larger, more natural, more tube-like imaging was characteristic of Soulution.) Finally, because of their tremendous energy and dense, lifelike color from the bottom bass right through the power range, the 711 and 725 might have driven your speakers and your room a little nuts on certain midbass notes in big tuttis. Of course, once you'd heard all that horripilating speed and slam and color, you wouldn't have cared.

Comes now the third generation of Soulution's 7 Series electronics, and while the new (as yet undesignated) monoblock and stereo amplifiers and the unique $79,975 757 de-emphasis preamp (which equalizes and boosts to line level the signals of every analog source you've got, from mm/mc/mi magnetic cartridges to DS Audio optical transducers to IEC or NAB R2R tapes) won't be available until next year, the all-new $74,975 727 linestage preamp (the optional phonostage card is an additional $11,975) hits the market in the fourth quarter of 2023—and made it into my listening room (along with a prototype 757) about six weeks before I began writing this review.



Considering the sterling specs and sound of the 725, Soulution's claims for its new preamp, in which every circuit has been updated or outright redesigned, are bold: noise reduced by roughly 20dB; bandwidth pushed from 2MHz to 20MHz (!), thus virtually eliminating phase errors in the audio band; common-mode rejection increased by 20dB; channel separation increased by 30dB; and distortion no longer measurable. "The sonic performance of the 727 preamplifier," says Cyrill Hammer, "[has been] pushed to yet another level. The soundstage gets wider and deeper with more air around instruments and performers. [There is] higher resolution combined with more lifelike musicality. There is even more heft and authority in the bass, while smallest details get resolved with greater delicacy."

As was the case with the second-generation Soulution 7 gear, the 727 preamp is housed in the same gun-metal grey chassis as the 720 and 725. The controls are a little different (e.g., there is only one multi-purpose knob now, which is rotated for volume adjustment and, when the unit is put in program mode, for sequencing through and selecting—by pressing the knob with a finger—optional settings displayed on the small, rectangular, front-panel LED screen). It is on the inside that the major improvements have been made.

These changes can be summarized as follows: the input stage, for both unbalanced and balanced inputs, is now controlled by "instrumentation amps" rather than by buffers and differential amps—the payoff being lower noise and higher common-mode rejection; the impedance of the volume control's resistor networks has been reduced to push its thermal noise below the noise level of the input stage, preserving even more low-level detail; the bandwidth of the output stage has been increased to 20MHz, reducing phase shift in the audio band and, thereby, increasing focus and definition (rather as if what would be called parallax in a rangefinder camera had been fully corrected); and the power supply is now a dual-mono SMPS with lower noise, lower distortion, and greatly shortened signal paths. (Let's be honest: As I'm not Robert Harley, I don't fully understand all the heroic engineering that went into the 727. Rather than pretending that I do by parroting Cyrill Hammer's detailed explanations, I refer the more scientific among you to the sidebar, wherein Cyrill specifies all that has changed in the 727 vis-à-vis the 725.)

Though the precise meaning of the many technical changes in the 727 may elude me, the way they've changed its sound has not. From the start, it was clear from listening to the new preamp (in combination with the soon-to-be-updated 711 amplifier and a prototype 757 deemphasis unit) that the 727's noise floor, which was already plenty low, is even lower, its resolution considerably increased, and its bandwidth more extended than that of the 725, without much of a change (if any) to the second-gen preamp's lush, beguiling tonal balance. The 727 now offers the incredible detail of the original 720 (maybe even in a greater amount), without the 720's somewhat leaned-down, more analytic presentation.

To my ear, the 727 also has higher definition than the 725 (or 720). Focus is tighter and more concentrated with individual instruments and vocalists, while the stage remains vast (on recordings with vast stages), and three-dimensionally tube-like body and presence are enhanced. This tightened focus produces clearer delineation and greater "isolation" of instrumentalists within large or small groups vis-à-vis each other and the acoustic space around them, which may simply be a confirmation of Hammer's claims "of more air around instruments and performers."

In a way, I have already talked about the 727's new sonic virtues in my review of the remarkable Kalista DreamPlay XC (Issue 344). When I spoke about the superior presentation of the Kalista's CD/SACD player, pointing to the more "complete" and realistic way it parsed the dynamic/harmonic envelopes of individual instruments—the burnished brassiness and mellow roundedness of actual trumpets, trombones, and saxes—I was also talking about the 727, through which the solid, three-dimensional body, the dense tone color, and the dynamic sparkle and effervescence of these brasses and winds were fully reproduced without any blurring of the performers' embouchure (their use of lips, tongue, teeth, and facial muscles) or any veiling of the acoustic (real or artificial) of the recording venue.

This ability to more completely define the nexus of instrument, instrumentalist, recording space, and engineering is, without doubt, a step forward for Soulution and a confirmation of the "higher resolution combined with more lifelike musicality" that Hammer claims for his new preamp. It is also a nifty technological accomplishment. In my experience, increased speed and resolution, greater extension and clarity in the treble, and tighter overall image focus are generally accompanied by a reduction in density of timbre (i.e., a leaning down of tone color as in the original 720) and an accentuation of the starting transient phase of the dynamic/harmonic envelope—e.g., a move toward a quicker,

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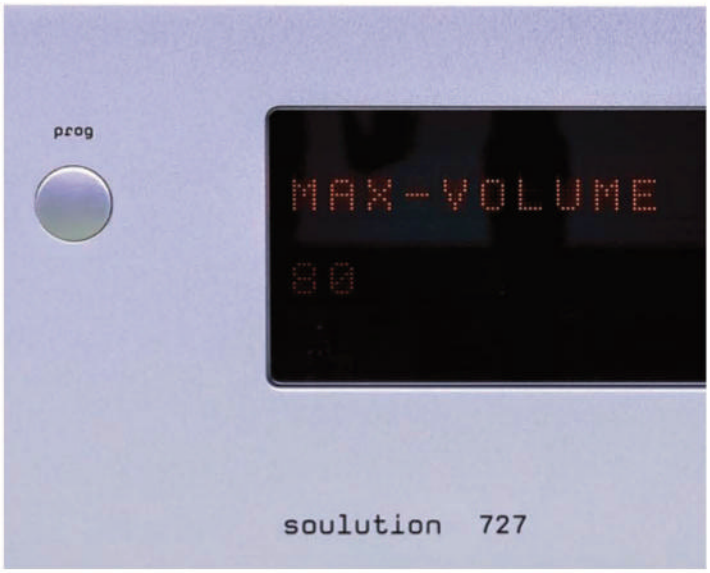

more minutely detailed "fidelity to sources" balance. In this instance, that is not the case.

Oh, the minutiae and the speed are there, all right. In abundance. Just give a listen to Hans Theessink's *Jedermann Remixed: The Soundtrack* [Blue Groove] on stream or (preferably) disc. The detailing of Theessink's masterful guitar work—the sweet *portamento*-like glissandos of the slide and the sharp *staccato*-like pluck of the fingerpicks—is so sensationally realistic that one can effortlessly visualize the artist and the instrument at play. Not just one or the other—instrument or performer—but both in combination making music (in this case, in an ORF studio through what appear to be closely situated AKG condenser and dynamic mics).

Just for fun (and to test the 727's low end), I revisited *Stop Making Sense* (one of the albums that had so wowed me with the original Soulution electronics two decades ago). Of course, I was using a far better version of the album with the 727 and the 711 than I was with the 720 preamp and the 710 amp 20 years past—Sire's superb 2023 reissue of the soundtrack, re-engineered by Mark Wolfson and Joel Moss in honor of the re-release of the film. It's a sonic blockbuster and a must-own if you're a Talking Heads fan.

Since the sound of the new two-disc LP set is inherently superior—much richer in color and detail and less flat, denatured, and digital (this was among the first digitally recorded albums)—than that of the original Sire release, it is not fair to attribute its virtues solely to the 727 (and the terrific 757 deemphasis preamp). Nonetheless, what I heard on this album in the low end (and everywhere else) is what I heard on LPs, CD/SACDs, streams, and tapes that had not been visited by the Good Vinyl Fairy.

Recorded live at The Pantages Theater in December 1983, *Stop Making Sense* has always been a special treat. How the band managed to perform such complexly scored and staged music *live* is still a wonderment, made even more wondrous through the Soulution 727 (and 757 and 711). All those myriad little musical crosscurrents you *thought* you were hearing back in 1984 are now plainly revealed. It's really a kind of magic to be able to effortlessly follow Tina Weymouth's bass ostinatos, Bernie Worrell's keyboard fills, Jerry Harrison's guitar riffs, Chris Frantz's kickdrum, toms, and crash cymbals, Lynn Mabry, Ednah Holt, Alex Weir, Jerry Harrison, and Frantz and Weymouth's backup vocals (on "Once In A Lifetime," the ensemble stretches from stage left to right in the mid-distance, with almost every voice distinct) in fullest color and dimensions, while David Byrne, also in full color and three dimensions, does his incomparable thing (right down to sign language and Big Suits) at centerstage. It's not just a sonic feast—it's a near-visual, emotional, and intellectual thrill ride. To hear the way the 727 and 757 distinguish Weymouth's Fender Jazz bass lines from the ongoing patter and 40Hz pedal-and-beater thump of Chris Frantz's Rogers toms and kickdrum and the swooping aerial dives of Bernie Worrell's Prophet 5 synth and Minimoog is to hear richly patterned music made from what were once less distinctly and fully characterized sounds.

Reservations and further thoughts? Well, first, for old Soulution hands like me, the new layout of buttons and knobs takes some getting used to. It's not that it's more complicated; it's just different. Second, the bass in the MBL X-Treme MKII system I'm using was optimized for the four superb MBL 9008 A monoblock amplifiers I originally had in place. The two Soulution 711 dual-mono stereo amps that I've recently installed in their stead—to equally fine effect—require slightly different volume and Q settings than the MBL amps. Dialing in these crossover variables on my own (without the assistance of Jürgen Reis or Jeremy Bryan) has made optimization of the low end also a bit of a moving target, though even without just-so fine-adjustments the Soulution bass is outstanding. (This will *not* be an issue for the vast majority of you.) Third, initially I was of two minds when it came to the 727's undeniably superior imaging. Frankly, I liked the larger, looser images of the 725, which to my ear were quite naturally sized. However, I soon came to think that the 727's almost pinpoint ability to clearly render individual members in a trio or quintet of backup singers or to separate each of the brasses and winds in a rhythm section (or each of the strings of a solo guitar, when it comes down to it) without (and this is essential) sacrificing the softer, more natural edge definition of the 725, was even more realistic—and enjoyable. Fourth, the 727's staging is also a bit different than (and superior to) that of the 725. Where the earlier preamp tended to isolate big, soft-edged centered images by projecting them forward in the mix (like a planar speaker), the 727's more focused but still soft-edged centered images are more completely embedded in the recorded acoustic. With recordings made in real halls or great studios, they aren't being "thrown back" so much as they are being conjoined with the other instruments in a common ambient space. The sense of performers playing in a shared acoustic that is different than that of your room (particularly pronounced when a recording is auditioned with an omni like the X-Treme MKII), is remarkable, as is the sense of the three-dimensionality of images and of the stage itself. Fifth, note that, for the moment, I haven't heard the 727 phono card, though I have no reason to think that Soulution's optional phonostage will disappoint. I've used Soulution preamps with built-in phono cards as my references for a decade and a half, and they've never let me

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or the music down. Sixth and last, I'm loath to pronounce final judgment on the 727 preamp without hearing it mated with Soulution's newest, completely updated amplifiers, which (alas) won't be available until next year. It is often claimed by TAS reviewers that sterling preamps are more or less colorless conduits to amplifiers of every sort and that what we hear is more the amp than the preamplifier. While I agree that amplifiers often have a stronger sonic stamp than preamps, I don't agree that the best preamplifiers are wholly and colorlessly autonomous. There is, IMO, an undeniable synergy in specific amp/preamp combinations (especially when the duo comes from the same manufacturer), wherein both components show their best in tandem. Though the 711 is scarcely chopped liver (I've never understood this phrase, as I love chopped liver), it may be—in fact, it will be—outdone by the 702 or 712 (or whatever designations Soulution decides on). Which means, despite its clear superiority to the 725 with the 711 stereo amp, I may not yet be hearing the 727 at its very best.

Final thoughts? This is the most "complete," the most lifelike preamp I've heard, fully living up to the sonic claims of its designer. Its ability to unearth musical and performance detail, correct "parallax"-like distortion, smoothly though not aggressively extend bandwidth, and better delineate sonic images without upsetting the timbral applecart or sacrificing a jot of three-dimensional body is quite an engineering feat. In fact, as noted, adding this much lifelike musical detail without steering, even slightly, toward the shoals of the analytical is a unique accomplishment in my experience. Naturally, the 727 gets my highest recommendation. The folks at TAS editorial agreed, naming it Solid-State Preamplifier of the Year (see page 62). It is an honor that is well deserved; this is a landmark design.

Specs & Pricing

Balanced inputs (XLR): 3
Unbalanced inputs (RCA): 2
Optional phono input: Moving-magnet/moving-coil, RIAA, 40–80dB gain, impedance adjustable
Balanced outputs: 2
Unbalanced output: 1
Frequency response (–3dB): DC–20MHz
Phase shift (@20kHz): 0.2 degrees
Common-mode rejection ratio (DC–20kHz): >100dB
Input noise density (20–20kHz): <-160dBV/√Hz
Channel separation (@20kHz): 127dB
Dimensions: 480 x 167 x 450mm
Weight: approx. 30kg (66 lbs.)
Price: $74,975 (optional mm/mc phono card $11,975)

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Linestage preamps: Soulution 727, MBL 6010 D, Siltech SAGA System C1
Phonostage preamps: Soulution 757, DS Audio Grand Master EQ unit
Power amplifiers: Soulution 711 (two), MBL 9008 A (four), Siltech SAGA System V1/P1, Odyssey Audio Stratos
Analog source: Acoustic Signature Invictus Neo/T-9000 Neo, Clearaudio Master Innovation, TW Acustic Black Knight/TW Raven 10.5
Tape deck: Metaxas & Sins Tourbillon T-RX, United Home Audio Ultima5 OPS-DC
Phono cartridges: DS Audio Grand Master, DS Audio Master1, DS Audio DS-W3, Clearaudio Goldfinger Statement II, Air Tight Opus 1, Ortofon MC Anna, Ortofon MC A90
Digital source: MSB Reference DAC, Soulution 760, Kalista DreamPlay XC
Cable and interconnect: Synergistic Research SRX Revised, Crystal Cable Art Series Da Vinci, Crystal Cable Ultimate Dream
Power cords: Synergistic Research SRX Revised, Crystal Cable Art Series Da Vinci, Crystal Cable Ultimate Dream
Power conditioner: Synergistic Research Galileo PowerCell SX (two), AudioQuest Niagara 5000 (two), Technical Brain
Support systems: Critical Mass Systems MAXXUM and QXK equipment racks and amp stands and Center Stage^{2M} footers
Room Treatments: Stein Music H2 Harmonizer system, Synergistic Research UEF Acoustic Panels/Atmosphere XL4/UEF Acoustic Dot system, Synergistic Research ART system, Shakti Hallographs (6), Zanden Acoustic panels, A/V Room Services Metu acoustic panels and traps, ASC Tube Traps
Accessories: DS Audio ES-001, DS Audio ION-001, SteinMusic Pi Carbon Signature record mat, Synergistic Research Vibratron SX, Synergistic Research Atmosphere Satellite Mini (two), Symposium Isis and Ultra equipment platforms, Symposium Rollerblocks and Fat Padz, Clearaudio Double Matrix Professional Sonic record cleaner, Synergistic Research RED Quantum fuses, HiFi-Tuning silver/gold fuses

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Cyrill Hammer on the Differences Between the 727 and the 725 Linestage Preamplifiers

What were the design goals in the 727 preamp?

The key design goals for the 727 preamplifier were: a) to further reduce noise generated by the unit; b) to further increase common-mode rejection of the balanced inputs; and c) to further reduce phase errors in the audio band by increasing the bandwidth. All the stages (input, volume control, and output) as well as the power supply in the 727 preamplifier had to comply with these target goals.

How does the input stage of the 727 differ from that of the 725?

The 725 had separate stages for the balanced and unbalanced inputs. The unbalanced input featured a low-noise voltage buffer; the balanced input used a standard differential amplifier, which provided common-mode rejection but added slightly more noise than the voltage buffer of the unbalanced input. (This is a major drawback of differential-amplifier design: Either you can optimize it for lowest noise and compromise on common-mode rejection or vice versa, but there is no way to optimize both parameters.)

The input stage of the 727 uses a more complex structure called an instrumentation amplifier, which allows optimization for both lowest noise and best common-mode rejection. The drawback to this structure is that it requires at least three op-amps, instead of just the one required for a standard differential amplifier. (So, higher-priced components and more PCB space are required.)

The input stage of the new 727 preamplifier is made of eight instrumentation amplifiers (with four op-amp structures in each), working in parallel and thus further reducing the noise of the input stage. In order to achieve a bandwidth of 20MHz and lowest input noise, off-the-shelf instrumentation amplifiers were, of course, not an option. The input stage of the 727 preamplifier is built from 32 ultra-low-noise, audio-grade, Burr-Brown op-amps and ultra-precise metal-film-resistor networks for lowest noise and best possible common-mode rejection. This took a tremendous engineering effort, but it paid off in sonic performance. In the 727, the new input stage is used for *both* the balanced and unbalanced inputs.

And the volume control?

The basic structure of the 727's volume control is very similar to the structure used in the 725. As in the 725, it features two volume-control paths: a high-quality path, which is active when playing music; and a click-free path, which is only active when altering the volume. Though the device is similar to what we had in the 725, the impedance of the respective resistor networks in the 727 volume control has been reduced considerably in order to push the thermal noise of the resistor network well below the noise level of the input stage. No details should be lost in the volume-control stage. The click-free path is conceptionally the same as that of the 725, based on the integrated circuit PGA2320 from

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Texas Instruments—a chip that is often used in high-quality products as the main volume control.

What has changed in the output stage?

The bandwidth of the output stage was increased from 2MHz in the 725 to 20MHz in the 727. This has a significant impact on the phase response of the unit. The lower bandwidth of the 725 does shift the phase between DC and 20kHz by approximately 2°; the higher bandwidth of the 727s output stage brings this phase shift closer to zero (< 0.1°).

Finally, what has changed in the power supply of the 727?

The 725 featured one "stereo" power supply used for both channels. A centralized "linear" power supply with a big toroidal transformer, rectifiers, filter capacitors, and a linear regulation stage generated the required voltages. It often goes unnoticed, but the rectifiers in so-called "linear" power supplies are switching devices. The switching frequency is 50 or 60Hz, depending on the mains supply. These rectifiers will, of course, generate a lot of harmonics, which widely propagate across the audio band. Subsequent filter and regulation stages are required to bring this noise down to minimal levels. In the 725 we used more than 500,000uF of capacitance and two regulation stages to filter this noise to acceptable levels.

The supply voltages were then distributed locally via cables to the audio sections of the left and right channel. Cables and long traces on PCBs introduce inductance into the supply rails, which limits the supply of high-frequency current to the sinks (op-amps, transistors). To offset this inductance, local storage capacitors were placed close to the sinks. These capacitors had to be rather large to do their job; therefore, they usually could not be placed as ideally close to the current sinks as the engineers would prefer.

The 727 power supply has a completely different structure.

This took a tremendous engineering effort, but it paid off in sonic performance.

First of all, it is a dual-mono design, which features a separate power supply for each channel. Part of each power supply is still centralized in a well-shielded compartment so that there will be no interference with the analog section. This is where all the switching takes place. The final regulation stage, which provides the current to the sinks, uses multiple local voltage regulators.

The centralized switched-mode power supply (SMPS, switching at 60kHz) converts the mains AC voltage to an intermediary DC voltage. The following DC-to-DC converter (switching at 400kHz) brings the supply voltage close to the required level for the analog sections and filters most of the switching noise generated by the SMPS. The DC-to-DC converter is followed by a low-noise (spot-noise <4uV/rtHz), wideband (>1MHz), low-dropout linear regulator (LDO). This low-noise and stable supply voltage gets distributed via copper planes throughout the PCB.

Next to each current sink (op-amp, transistor) there is a local, ultra-low-noise (spot-noise <2nV/rtHz), low drop-out regulator (LDO), which brings the voltage down to the required level. These high-performing integrated circuits are very small (3mm x 3mm) and can therefore be placed very close to the active current-sinking device. In the 727 preamplifier, the local regulators sit on the bottom side of the PCB right underneath the active devices. With this layout the traces from the final regulation stage to the sink are very short (<2mm). Apart from providing an ultra-low-noise supply voltage, this also ensures shortest signal paths. There are more than 40 local regulators per channel. tas

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Manufacturers Comments

Dynaudio Confidence 20 Loudspeaker

On behalf of everyone at Dynaudio, we thank Neil Gader, Robert Harley, and TAS for such an enjoyable and eloquent review of our Confidence 20. We also offer special thanks to Alan Taffel, who heard the '20 in our suite at AXPONA 2023 and recommended it as a "must review in TAS" candidate. Although it lacks the benefits afforded by the additional drivers and DDC lens of its larger brethren, Confidence 20 exudes a similar prowess and finesse because it was designed to be the best compact Dynaudio monitor ever made—and we've made more than a few. Perhaps "there is something special about 2-way monitors"; however, we posit this is where our in-house design and production capabilities matter most. In addition to proving all aspects of the proprietary electrical and mechanical design of the Confidence 20 in our state-of-the-art measurement facility, Jupiter, it's the extensive experience of our R&D team that allows the '20 to combine qualities that are mostly mutually exclusive in 2-way monitors: effortless scale and power with the ability to communicate music in a highly resolved yet natural and emotionally engaging way. A unique combination of strengths befitting the best monitor Dynaudio has ever made. We're delighted Neil agrees!

Michael Manousselis and John Quick
Dynaudio North America, Inc.

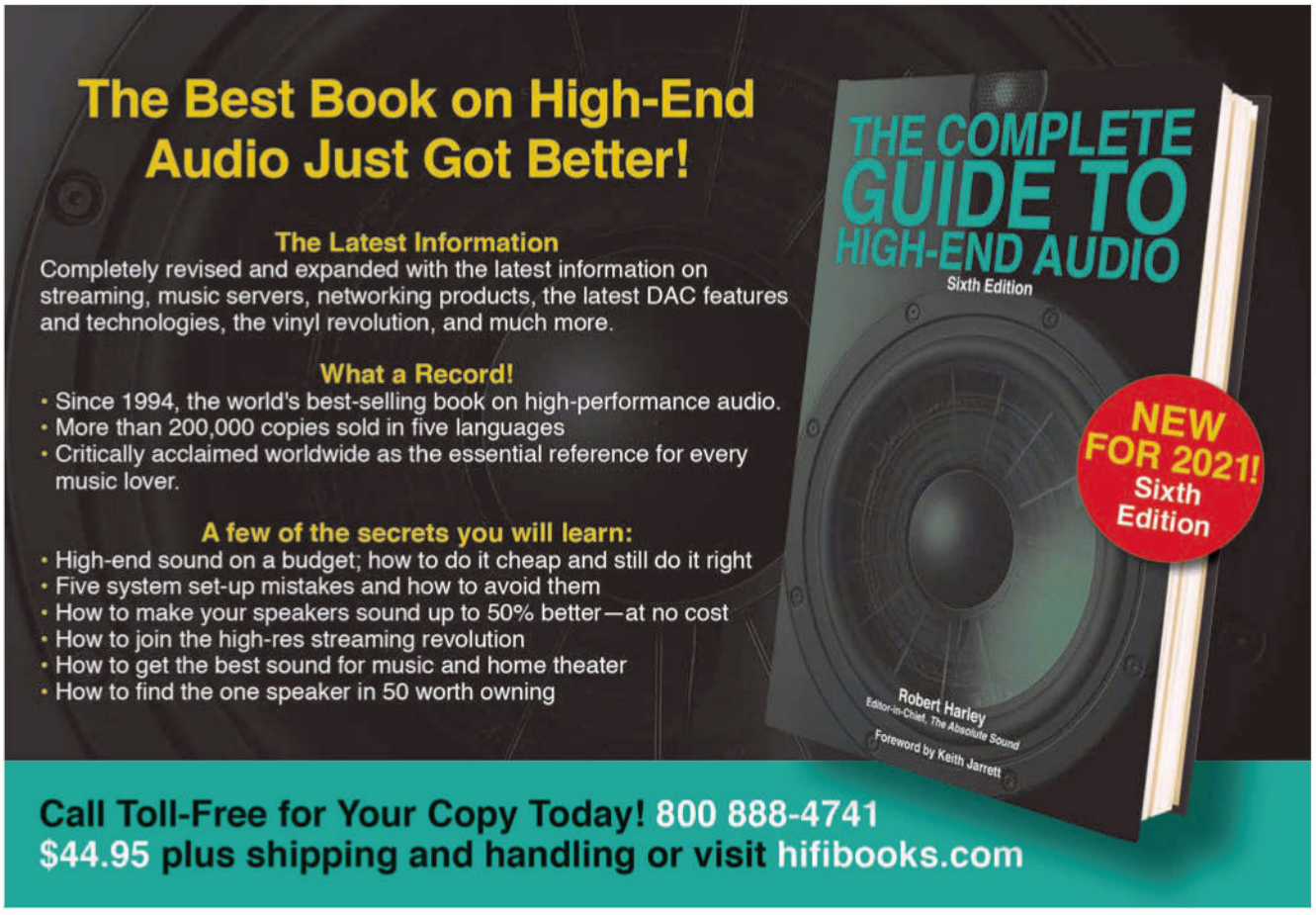
CH Precision P10 Phonostage

We're very pleased that Michael so enjoyed his time with the P10. Its performance is the result of a lot of hard work, and it's nice when those efforts are appreciated. We'd like to take this opportunity to clarify two points.

Michael mentions the boards in the review P10 being replaced before he listened to it. The unit was originally shipped with pre-production boards, and these were replaced with production pieces for the review, ensuring that the review unit was fully representative.

As he also points out, the P10 has the facility to offer a range of additional phono-replay EQ curves. We recognize that not everybody will have the desire or the record collection to use those curves, which is why we make them an option that can be specified at time of purchase or added later. Each set of optional cards includes all seven additional curves (you don't have to select which ones you want and pay for them individually).

Florian Cossy
CH Precision



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2023 Top Ten Lists

Jeff Wilson

We're trying something new with this music section. Already, at the end of every year, we've compiled top ten lists focusing on the best new music from that year.

That part of the music section remains the same this time around, but now we'd like you to think of the entire music section as a list in two parts.

Almost all of the titles in the top ten lists consist of new music, which means you have almost 90 albums of newly recorded albums that our music writers have recommended.

At the same time, some high-profile reissues and archival releases have been vying for everyone's attention. This year we decided to weight our reviews and feature articles toward some of the most appealing reissues and archival releases, including a number of "super deluxe editions."

So this music section is the best of both worlds—new music by current artists, plus the types of reissues and archival releases that generate a lot of excitement during the second half of the year.

It's always fun, after all the top ten lists arrive, to tally up the results. Repeat winners this year include Paul Simon, whose *Seven Psalms* showed up in two lists and was deemed the #1 album by Greg Cahill. Wednesday's *Rat Saw God* showed up on two top tens, and jazz bassist Christian McBride appeared twice. The latest album by Rickie Lee Jones, *Pieces of Treasure*, ended up in the top spot on one list and got second place in another.

John McLaughlin was also highlighted. As a member of Shakti, the guitarist topped Bill Milkowski's jazz list this year, and he also figured prominently in my feature on *Miles Davis: The Electric Years*, which focuses on studio albums that Miles released between 1969 and 1974. That was the period when McLaughlin went from being a well-respected guitarist to an artist who, as leader of the Mahavishnu Orchestra, sold millions of records. After Mahavishnu folded, McLaughlin concentrated on Shakti, which was seen at the time as a commercial crash-dive. The excitement generated by a recent high-profile 50th anniversary tour was a major affirmation for a band that has long deserved the recognition it's now receiving.

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MUSIC TOP TEN

Ten Best Independent Albums of 2023

Hannah Blanchette

While reflecting on the records that invigorated me in 2023, spanning rock, folk, and electronic styles, I noticed a trend of extremes. This year brought us both the gnarled guitar improvisations of Yo La Tengo's *This Stupid World* and the lush chamber settings of Mitski's *The Land Is Inhospitable And So Are We*. But what is most striking is how each record contains multitudes within itself, extremes of swirling passion and dulcet intimacy. Wednesday was able to go from the wails of "Bull Believer" to the sweet, lilting melody on "Quarry." Oneohtrix Point Never's *Again* consciously meditates on the breadth of his career through a collage-like journey. And no one demonstrates drastic musical shifts better than Bill Orcutt, whose acoustic guitar style shifts between pastoral plucks and percussive rips across the fretboard. Many of these records elude simple categorization, with artists like Water From Your Eyes creating experimental pop that pulls from such divergent inspirations it can be hard to name one. Hearing music across styles is easier than ever before, and musicians are emerging from their influences to make the familiar fresh and strange. This year saw independent artists embracing the manifold potential of their expression, unafraid to push how far their sound could go.

1. Yo La Tengo: *This Stupid World.* Matador.
2. Mitski: *The Land Is Inhospitable And So Are We.* Dead Oceans.
3. Wednesday: *Rat Saw God.* Dead Oceans.
4. Meg Baird: *Furling.* Drag City.
5. Bill Orcutt: *Jump on It.* Palilalia.
6. The Reds, Pinks and Purples: *The Town That Cursed Your Name.* Slumberland Records.
7. Far Caspian: *The Last Remaining Light.* Tiny Library.
8. Oneohtrix Point Never: *Again.* Warp.
9. Youth Lagoon: *Heaven Is a Junkyard.* Fat Possum.
10. Water From Your Eyes: *Everyone's Crushed.* Matador.

Ten Best Rock Albums of 2023

Greg Cahill

This year it seemed like it was Taylor Swift's world and we were just living in it. The singer/songwriter released four albums, and headlined a record-breaking $2.2 billion tour in a year that also saw Joni Mitchell, 79, return after a 53-year absence to the Newport Folk Festival. Peter Gabriel, 73, teased fans with a rare concert tour while slow rolling eight digital tracks from his forthcoming *i/o* album. Overall, rock surged with new music by Bob Dylan, the Rolling Stones, Johnny Marr, Steven Wilson, the Pretenders, Prince, Wilco, Roger Waters, the Foo Fighters, Blink 182, Greta Van Fleet, Guided by Voices, Metallica, Jethro Tull, and a reconstituted Blur, among others. Neil Young coughed up 1977's long-lost *Chrome Dreams*; the 1973 live set *Somewhere Under the Rainbow*; and the vinyl debuts of *Odeon Budokan*, *Freedom*, *Ragged Glory*, and *Arc/Weld*. And labels saturated the market with reissued vinyl: Dylan, the Beatles, the Stones, Joni Mitchell, R.E.M., the Kinks, the Doors, Bob Marley, Tom Waits, Steely Dan, Talking Heads, Aerosmith, Devo, Bad Company, Outkast, Black Sabbath, Collective Soul, Evanescence, Oasis, Pink Floyd, Thin Lizzy, the Eagles, Billy Joel, the Who, the Cars, the Replacements, Peter Frampton, Stevie Nicks, Steve Miller, Van Morrison, Frank Zappa, Yes, Flaming Lips, King Crimson, Led Zeppelin, plus Rhino's 4.0 quad series and the 12-CD *Soul'd Out: The Complete Wattstax Collection*. . . . And the beat goes on. Here are ten top picks:

1. Paul Simon: *Seven Psalms.* Sony.
2. Rickie Lee Jones: *Pieces of Treasure.* BMG/Modern Recordings.
3. Rufus Wainwright: *Folkocracy.* BMG.
4. John Mellencamp: *Orpheus Descending.* UMG/Republic.
5. Taj Mahal: *Savoy.* Stony Plain.
6. Joni Mitchell: *Live at Newport.* Rhino.
7. U2: *Songs of Surrender.* Interscope.
8. Tom Petty & the Heartbreakers: *Live at the Fillmore, 1997.* Warner.
9. Cat Power: *Sings Dylan: The 1966 Royal Albert Hall Concert.* Domino.
10. Elvis Costello/Burt Bacharach: *The Songs of Bacharach & Costello.* UMe.

Ten Best Rock Albums of 2023

Greg Gaston

This has proven to be a year of rejuvenation for many veteran artists. Van Morrison's *Moving On Skiffle* offers a relaxed ramble through a thicket of folk standards. Van is now 78, and his voice sounds as soulful and steely as ever. In recovery from a recent stroke, Lucinda Williams releases *Stories from a Rock n Roll Heart*, her best material of the last decade. Rickie Lee Jones comes back with her bittersweet *Pieces of Treasure,* a collection filled with intimate torch standards, including Sinatra's "One for My Baby." Raul Malo, the Mavericks' singer, plays sweet Spanish guitar on his instrumental solo record, *Say Less*. Marty Stuart and his Fabulous Superlatives turn in one of his strongest records, *Altitude*, a Byrds-inspired flight of turbo-twang country music. The Arcs' *Electrophonic Chronic*, Dan Auerbach's excellent side project, allows him more freedom to experiment sonically beyond the Black Keys' monochrome crunch. Wednesday's *Rat Saw God* is a fuzzed out, indie country/punk contender, and Karly Hartzman's cracked voice spills tales of suburban wasteland. Nat Myers, a young Korean-American guitarist, debuts with *Yellow Peril*, an acoustic folk/blues standout. Some 30 years after Uncle Tupelo broke up, its two main songwriters still bring the heat: Jay Farrar's Son Volt spins a stirring Tex-Mex tribute to Doug Sahm on *Day of the Doug*, and Jeff Tweedy's Wilco release their freshest record in years with *Cousin*.

1. Rickie Lee Jones: *Pieces of Treasure.* BMG/Modern Recordings.
2. Van Morrison: *Moving on Skiffle.* Exile Productions.
3. Son Volt: *Day of the Doug.* Thirty Tigers.
4. Raul Malo: *Say Less.* Mono Mundo B.
5. Marty Stuart: *Altitude.* Snakefarm.
6. The Arcs: *Electrophonic Chronic.* Easy Eye Sound.
7. Wilco: *Cousin.* dBpm.
8. Nat Myers: *Yellow Peril.* Easy Eye Sound.
9. Wednesday: *Rat Saw God.* Dead Oceans.
10. Lucinda Williams: *Stories from a Rock n Roll Heart.* Thirty Tigers.

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MUSIC TOP TEN

Ten Best Roots Albums of 2023

David McGee

It took nothing less than the return of the Blind Boys of Alabama after a six-year absence on record to nudge two bluegrass veterans at the top of their respective games down a notch or two on this year's Roots Top Ten. The Blind Boys' *Echoes of the South* goes beyond its geographical center to speak to turbulent times throughout the land in rethinking soul shaking topical tunes by the likes of Stevie Wonder, Pops Staples, and Curtis Mayfield, among others. It's as essential an album as 2023 produced. Another gospel artist, South Africa's Jonathan Butler, gave the Blind Boys a run in topicality with his powerful *Ubuntu* (a Zulu word meaning showing humanity to your brother), which counsels collective dignity born of spiritual introspection in songs such as "Our Voices Matter" and, yes, another Stevie Wonder entry, "Superwoman (Where Were You When I Needed You)." Honoring the Great American Songbook on her fifth album, *Dreamland*, classic pop chanteuse Libby York offers evocative, romantic takes on tunes by the likes of Mercer, Rodgers and Hart, Abbey Lincoln, and others. At which point you can let the rest of the world go by.

1. Blind Boys of Alabama: *Echoes of the South*. Single Lock.
2. Michael Cleveland: *Lovin' of the Game*. Compass.
3. Dale Ann Bradley: *Kentucky for Me*. Pinecastle.
4. Jonathan Butler: *Ubuntu*. Artistry Music.
5. Eric Bibb: *Ridin'*. Stony Plain Music.
6. John Primer: *Teardrops for Magic Slim*. Blues House Productions.
7. Mike Zito & Albert Castiglia: *Blood Brothers*. SoNo Recording Group.
8. Paul Simon: *Seven Psalms*. Sony.
9. Libby York: *Dreamland*. OA2.
10. Jim Lauderdale & The Po' Ramblin' Boys: *The Long and Lonesome Letting Go*. Sky Crunch.

Top Ten Jazz Albums for 2023

Bill Milkowski

My Top Ten list for 2023 is dominated by seasoned veterans. Elder statesman of the pack is 81-year-old guitar legend John McLaughlin, whose latest Shakti release, *This Moment*, is a revelation for its "elation, elegance and exaltation," to borrow a phrase from John Coltrane's liner notes to *A Love Supreme*. Younger but similarly seasoned is 71-year-old guitarist John Scofield, whose *Uncle John's Band* is an eclectic trio outing with bassist Vicente Archer and drummer Bill Stewart. The album title refers to the Grateful Dead tune that closes out the collection, but it could also be referring to the goateed guitarist's elder status as an "uncle figure" to hordes of jam band fans half his age. Another veteran who scored high marks is bassist-composer-bandleader-jazz ambassador Christian McBride, whose *Prime*, a pianoless outing by his New Jawn Quartet, explores more avant-garde territory than we associate with the bassist while also paying homage to the elders. Other veterans on my list include guitarist Kurt Rosenwinkel, pianist Brad Mehldau, saxophonist Joshua Redman, and Mark Turner. Two relative newcomers, alto saxophonist Lakecia Benjamin and guitarist Dan Wilson, both had stunning sophomore outings in 2023.

1. Shakti: *This Moment*. Abstract Logix.
2. Kurt Rosenwinkel: *Undercover (Live at the Village Vanguard)*. Heartcore.
3. Christian McBride's New Jawn: *Prime*. Mack Avenue.
4. John Scofield: *Uncle John's Band*. ECM.
5. Chris Potter: *Got the Keys to the Kingdom: Live at the Village Vanguard*. Edition.
6. Brad Mehldau: *Your Mother Should Know: Brad Mehldau Plays The Beatles*. Nonesuch.
7. Joshua Redman: *where are we*. Blue Note.
8. Mark Turner: *Live at the Village Vanguard*. Giant Step Arts.
9. Dan Wilson: *Things Eternal*. Mack Avenue.
10. Lakecia Benjamin: *Phoenix*. Whirlwind.

Ten Best Jazz Albums of 2023

Derk Richardson

Introspective solo and duo recordings that provided reflective refuge during lockdown times still hold sway with me, but 2023 brought forth a plethora of brilliant octets, nonets, and larger ensembles that challenged the boundaries of jazz in delightful ways. So, one half of this subjective best-of-the-year list celebrates the ultra-intimate: guitarist Ralph Towner's latest solo masterpiece (and he has never sounded better); experimental marimba and vibraphone player Taiko Saito's otherworldly solo breakthrough; bassist Mark Dresser's dazzling explorations of his radically customized upright basses' sonic potentials; pianist/vocalist Robin Holcomb's welcome re-emergence with her moody Americana folk-jazz; and the latest collaboration from Ivo Perelman (sax) and Matthew Shipp (piano). The other half reflects the trend toward eccentric instrumental groupings led by composers who integrate elements as diverse as chamber music, free improvisation, and rock: On the albums by Fujii, Henry Threadgill, pianist Angelica Sanchez, cellist Peggy Lee, and bassist Todd Sickafoose you'll hear a wide variety of saxophones, clarinets, brass, strings, percussion, electronics, and guitars, as well as accordion and bassoon, all played in ways that invigorate the listener's imagination.

1. Satoko Fujii: *Hyaku, One Hundred Dreams*. Libra.
2. Henry Threadgill Ensemble: *The Other One*. Pi.
3. Ralph Towner: *At First Light*. ECM.
4. The Peggy Lee Band: *A Giving Way*. Songlines.
5. Todd Sickafoose: *Bear Proof*. Secret Hatch.
6. The Angelica Sanchez Nonet: *Nighttime Creatures*. Pyroclastic.
7. Robin Holcomb: *One Way or Another, Vol. 1*. Songlines.
8. Taiko Saito: *Tears of a Cloud*. Trouble in the East.
9. Ivo Perelman and Matthew Shipp: *Fruition*. ESP-Disk'.
10. Mark Dresser: *Tines of Change*. Pyro clastic.

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MUSIC TOP TEN

Ten Best Jazz Records of 2023

Greg Turner

When I began compiling this list I didn't realize how many of these musicians have Philadelphia in common. Christian McBride and Johnathan Blake were born and raised there, Buster Williams and Orrin Evans got much of their early recognition in Philly, and Terell Stafford is the director of the jazz studies program at Temple University in Philadelphia. Stafford and Tim Warfield, who also teaches at Temple and came up on that city's jazz scene, are the front line on Stafford's album and on Rodney Whitaker's third recording of the music of Gregg Hil. For the record, the album title of the year goes to Mike LeDonne and Eric Alexander's *The Heavy Hitters*. After the first tune, you know they live up to that name! This year's new discovery is trumpeter Anthony Hervey, a recent Julliard graduate I saw on one of Emmet Cohen's Monday night podcasts, playing one of my favorite compositions, Ellis Marsalis' "Twelve's It." I haven't heard the first volume of Don Braden's tribute to the music of Earth Wind and Fire and Stevie Wonder, but based on volume two, I'll be looking for it! Walter Smith's performance at this year's Chicago Jazz Festival made me reinvestigate *Return to Casual* and put him on this list over a lot of worthy challengers in this great year of recordings.

1. Christian McBride's New Jawn: *Prime.* Mack Avenue.
2. Johnathan Blake: *Passage.* Blue Note.
3. Buster Williams: *Unalome.* Smoke Sessions.
4. Orrin Evans: *The Red Door.* Smoke Sessions.
5. Terell Stafford: *Between Two Worlds.* LeCoq.
6. Rodney Whitaker: *Oasis: The Music of Gregg Hill.* Origin.
7. Mike LeDonne & Eric Alexander: *The Heavy Hitters.* Cellar Music.
8. Anthony Hervey: *Words from My Horn.* Outside In Music.
9. Don Braden: *Earth Wind and Wonder, Vol. 2.* Creative Perspective.
10. Walter Smith III: *Return to Casual.* Blue Note.

Ten Best Classical Albums of 2023

Ted Libbey

All told, it was a good year for completists. Deutsche Grammophon finished its complete cycle of the Shostakovich symphonies with Andris Nelsons and the Boston Symphony; Sony finished its complete cycle of the Bruckner symphonies with Christian Thielemann and the Vienna Philharmonic. Kudos again to DG for the complete Nielsen symphonies and concertos from Copenhagen with Fabio Luisi conducting. That said, new studio recordings of opera are essentially a thing of the past—too expensive to undertake—which is a pity since we have so many fine singers in our midst. And the pace of significant reissues from major catalogs has slowed considerably—Warner (EMI), Universal (DG, Decca, Philips), and Sony (Columbia and RCA) have all left quite a lot of material, both analog and digital, in their vaults. On that score, I'm disappointed. We have the Solti *Ring* now as a hi-res download from Universal, but where are the Mackerras Janácek operas, Colin Davis' Sibelius with Boston, the Kertész Brahms with Vienna, Maazel and Cleveland, Dorati and Detroit?

Enough. Here are my top ten for the year, all available in hi-res:

1. Beethoven: String Quartets (complete). Budapest String Quartet. Sony.
2. Nielsen: Symphonies and Concertos (complete). Danish NSO, Luisi. DG.
3. *My Soul, What Fear You?* Purves, Lepper, et al. King's College.
4. Vaughan Williams: Symphonies Nos. 7 and 9. BBC SO, Brabbins. Hyperion.
5. Ysaÿe: Six Sonatas, Op. 27. Hahn. DG.
6. Fauré: *Nocturnes & Barcarolles.* Hamelin. Hyperion.
7. *Divergent Paths.* String Quartets by Ravel and Schoenberg. Telegraph Quartet. Azica.
8. Bruckner: Symphonies (complete). Vienna Philharmonic, Thielemann. Sony.
9. *Coronation Anthems.* Akademie für Alte Musik Berlin, Doyle. Harmonia Mundi.
10. Shostakovich: Symphonies (complete). Boston SO. Nelsons. DG.

Ten Best Classical Albums of 2023

Peter Burwasser

There's nothing wrong with the old classical chestnuts, but it is always rewarding to be surprised by something novel, either from a living composer or a forgotten master of time past. The haunting and utterly undeservingly neglected music of the Soviet era composer Grigori Frid belongs in the latter category, while the boldly daring symphony of Livia Teodorescu-Cioc□nea, the bristling bio-opera *X* by Anthony Davis, and the serenely beautiful choral setting of *St. Matthew Passion* by Danish composer Bent Sørensen are all new. Coming from the last century are fresh and vividly engaging versions of Olivier Messiaen's majestically sprawling solo piano work and Steve Reich's minimalist masterpiece. In the standard repertoire department, I enjoyed the glistening Mozart of pianist Orli Shaham, the regal Beethoven of the young pianist Haochen Zhang, and a wonderfully dramatic performance by Timothy Ridout of the viola version of Elgar's great Cello Concerto. *Scheherazade* is about as chestnutty as it gets, but this new version (as heard in the vinyl incarnation) is very well played by Britain's National Symphony Orchestra, and, as befits the readership of this magazine, spectacularly well recorded by the sound engineering fanatics at Chasing the Dragon.

1. Teodorescu-Ciocănea: *Archimedes Symphony.* Toccata.
2. Sørensen: *St. Matthew Passion.* Pederson/Ensemble Allegria. BIS.
3. Messiaen: *Vingt Regards sur l'enfant Jesus.* Kristoffer Hyldig. Our Recordings.
4. Davis: *X: The Life and Times of Malcom X.* BMOP.
5. Frid: Music for Violin and Piano. Challenge Classics.
6. Mozart: Piano Sonatas. Orli Shaham. Canary Classics.
7. Reich: Music for 18 Musicians. Colin Currie Records.
8. Elgar: Viola Concerto. Harmonia Mundi.
9. Rimsky-Korsakov: *Scheherazade.* Chasing the Dragon.
10. Beethoven: Complete Piano Concertos. Zhang. PO, Stutzmann. BIS.

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Antal Doráti: The Mercury Masters

The Complete Mercury Recordings

Arthur Lintgen

Eloquence has reissued the complete Mercury recordings of Antal Doráti conducting the Minneapolis Symphony Orchestra, divided into mono (31 CDs) and stereo (30 CDs) albums. The project was supervised by Thomas Fine, the son of C. Robert Fine and Wilma Cozart Fine, who produced and engineered the original Mercurys. Despite their age, these newly remastered CDs originating from what has been called the Golden Age of Recording have held up well sonically compared to many contemporary releases.

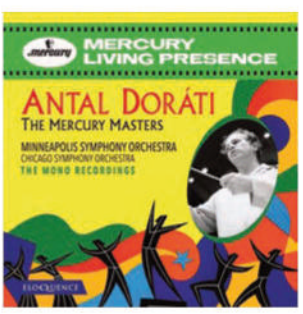
Doráti's conducting style was dynamic, powerful, and emphasized rhythmic intensity that was likely a product of his experience as a superb ballet conductor. His mono complete *The Nutcracker*, *Swan Lake*, and *The Sleeping Beauty* were landmarks in recording history because of their white-hot performances and sensational sound. Similarly, the Stravinsky ballets (*The Firebird*, *The Rite of Spring*, and *Petrouchka*) were unparalleled in their clarity of instrumental lines and rhythmic intensity. In fact, the principal complaint about Doráti was that he drove the music too hard. That may be true in some cases, but most of his recorded repertoire responded well to this approach, which provides a refreshing alternative to many of the bland, characterless performances that are so common today.

Doráti's interpretation of Copland's Third Symphony is intense but not grandiose because his tempos are faster than you are likely to hear today. He made a thrilling recording of Borodin's Second Symphony when it was rarely played. The *1812* Overture was unprecedented at the time for its popularity, but I was more impressed with his electrifying *Capriccio Italien*. Dorati's mono version of Bartók's Concerto for Orchestra, and *The Miraculous Mandarin* Suite and Kodály's *Peacock Variations* (with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra) rank with the best. The Respighi Roman Cycle is consistently good, but his recording of *Church Windows* is famous in audiophile circles for its massive gong crash even though the music with its climactic organ solo and ending resembling *The Pines of Rome* represents high level Respighi. The Strauss waltzes have a rhythmic snap that adds to their stature and interest. Ravel's complete *Daphnis and Chloe* is interpretively on a level similar to Charles Munch's famous RCA recording, but I found him to be curiously disengaged with Richard Strauss's *Ein Heldenleben*.

Doráti rerecorded some of the mono albums in order to benefit from stereo sound (for example, the *1812* Overture, *Capriccio Italien*, *Pines* and *Fountains of Rome*, among others). His stereo recordings with the Minneapolis and London Symphony Orchestras are the centerpieces of the Mercury catalog. Doráti's version of Kodály's *Háry János* Suite is an audiophile legend that has never been matched interpretively. This is hardly surprising when you consider the affinity he had for the music of Bartók and Kodály. The same is true of his ballet recordings. The complete Delibes *Coppélia* must be heard to be believed, especially in terms of its extreme dynamics and timpani-driven rhythmic intensity. *Gaîté Parisienne* is probably too intense when compared to Arthur Fiedler's delightful and justly acclaimed performance, but Doráti's own arrangement of *Graduation Ball* is special. Some feel that the Dvo□ák *Slavonic Dances* are too aggressive, but I enjoy them. The Overture and Dances from Smetana's *The Bartered Bride* are just about perfect in their dynamics and rhythmic precision. Doráti does not just drive the music hard and fast. He adds subtle tempo variations that give the pieces their natural swing. As expected, Copland's *Rodeo* and *El Salon Mexico* are sensational with the prominent timpani and percussion underlining the rhythms. The same is true of Tchaikovsky's *Francesca da Rimini* and *Marche Slave*. Doráti fans will be happy to have the first CD release of his own Symphony. In addition to the mostly mainstream repertoire, he also recorded music by lesser-known composers such as Alberto Ginastera, Alan Peterson, Gunther Schuller, and Paul Fetler.

Despite their age, these newly remastered CDs have held up well sonically compared to many contemporary releases.

Doráti made some good recordings of Mozart and Beethoven with the Minneapolis Symphony Orchestra, but his hyper dynamic style was better suited to the power music of the late 19th and early 20th centuries that he so frequently recorded. The mono recordings will be treasures for Doráti and Mercury fans because most of them have never been released on CD. The stereo recordings sound even better but many of them are already available on CD in the Universal Mercury box sets. Still to come are Doráti's valuable recordings with the London Symphony Orchestra that responded so well to his conducting style, but was more refined in its playing than the Minneapolis Symphony Orchestra. tas



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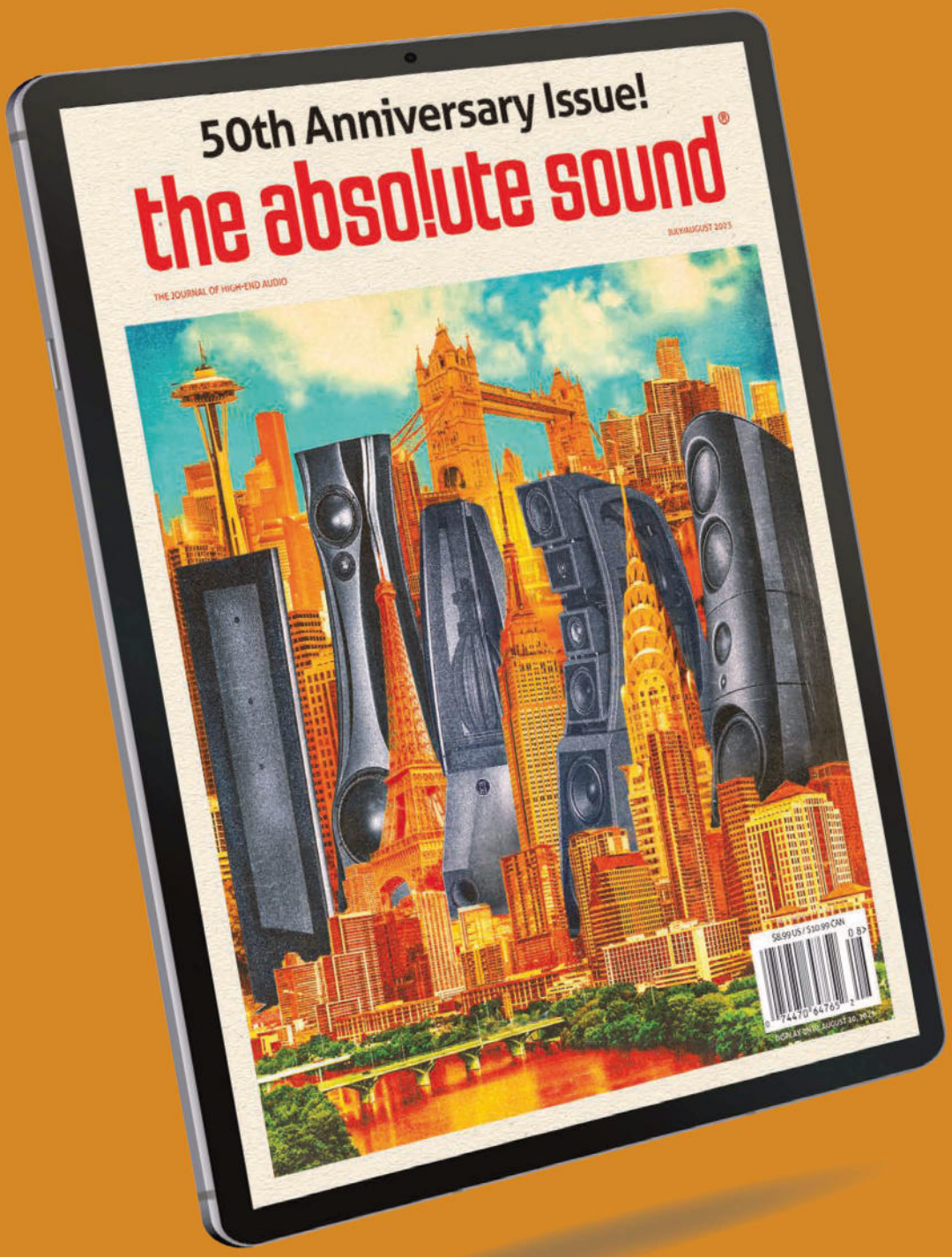

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When Miles Went Electric

Remastered Vinyl Revisits Radical Recordings

Jeff Wilson

At the 2016 AXPONA I ran into some representatives from the vinyl reissue label Vinyl Me, Please (VMP) who set up a table at the marketplace. Reaching out to the audiophile community in such a direct manner seemed like a wise strategy for a label that was still new and in its infancy. Apparently VMP has made some other good decisions since then, as it's definitely achieved a much higher profile, and news that VMP will open its own audiophile vinyl pressing plant complete with retail and tours in the RiNo neighborhood of Denver in 2024 confirms the fact that VMP has legs. (And yes, that will be covered in TAS.)

Vinyl Me, Please also deserves credit for rolling out a new vinyl box set consisting of studio albums recorded by Miles Davis during phase one of his electric years, starting with *In A Silent Way* (1969) and ending with *Get Up With It* (1974). In all, *Miles Davis: The Electric Years* contains seven albums, and because four of the records are 2-LP sets, that takes us to 11 discs. When VMP curated this set, it seems to me they got it right, for while two previous Miles albums helped lay the groundwork for electric Miles, *In A Silent Way* (1969) was the album that announced, in no uncertain terms, that Miles Davis was making music in a new way. That album appears in VMP's deluxe edition along with *Bitches Brew* (1970), *Jack Johnson* (1971), *Live-Evil* (1971), *On the Corner* (1972), *Big Fun* (1974), and *Get Up with It* (1974). Because it contains some live material, *Live-Evil* might seem like the outlier here, but its inclusion makes sense because the studio tracks offer a fuller picture of what Miles was cooking up in the studio along with producer Teo Macero during that five-year stretch (plus it has some scorching live material from a club appearance).

Clearly the studio albums only tell part of the early electric story, as Miles also released a couple 2-LP live albums between 1969 and 1974 and added a couple more by 1976. But while the live albums complete the picture, focusing on these recordings encourages us to wrap our heads around what happened when Miles Davis and producer Teo Macero collaborated on studio projects. Prior to going electric, Miles mostly focused on acoustic small group recordings where every attempt was made to create a realistic in-the-room presence. When he "went electric," he didn't just change instrumentation and crank up some amps, he changed his whole approach to recording. In tandem with producer Teo Macero, he treated the studio as a laboratory, and together the two cooked up some wild experiments. The soundscapes that resulted had more correlatives in the pop world than in jazz or, for that matter, jazz fusion. While listening to some of the more radical experiments in this set, I hear the same spirit of experimentation and discovery that guided *Sergeant Pepper* or *Dark Side of the Moon* or, much later, Radiohead and the Flaming Lips.

The process was different, however. In pop music, cathedrals of sound have often

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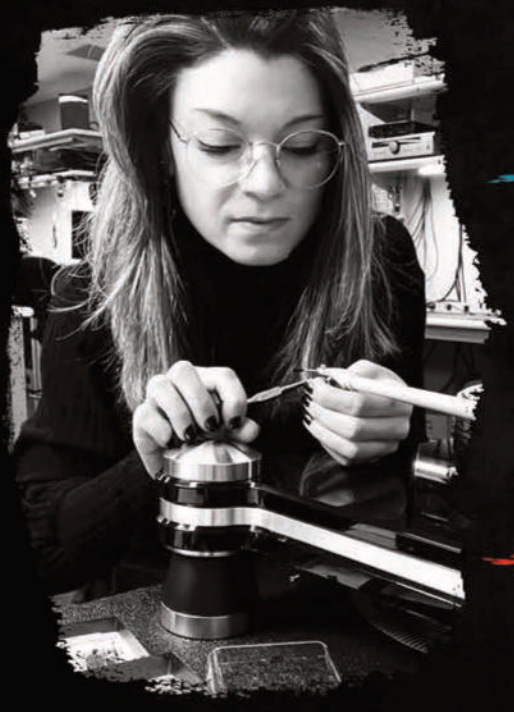

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been built brick by brick, but Miles started things off by jamming endlessly, offering minimal guidance to his sidemen while filling reel after reel of tape in his effort to capture lighting in a bottle. Employing as many as 12 musicians on one track, Miles was no stranger to busy soundscapes. Sometimes keyboards in separate channels conversed with each other and responded to the soloists. On *Bitches Brew*, some cuts feature a drummer in both the left and right channel. Miles was always searching for new sounds, so while of course guitars were hooked up to wah-wah pedals—after all, this was the late 60s and early 70s, right?—his trumpet and Michael Henderson's bass also made use of this new technology. In the same spirit of innovation, both Khalil Balakrishna and Colin Walcott played electric sitar during the *On the Corner* sessions while Paul Buckmaster played electric cello. Also filling up the soundscape were such instruments as the tamboura, tabla, electric sitar, cuica, berimbau, and transverse flute.

As it turned out, those jam sessions were just the beginning of the process. Eventually Teo Macero started reconstructing the raw material, including some cutting and splicing. After-the-fact studio effects include the slap-echo Teo added to Miles' trumpet on the title track to *Bitches Brew*. Due to the use of a noise gate, Jack DeJohnette's drums get panned on "Go Ahead John" from *Big Fun* and McLaughlin's guitar solo gets so scrambled that it comes across as a form of aural slapstick. In *Milestones: The Music and Times of Miles Davis*, Jack Chambers quotes Teo Macero discussing a section of "Go Ahead John" where, due to Teo's studio wizardry, Miles sounds like he's dueting with himself: "I called [Davis] in and I said, 'Come in, I think we've got something you'll like. We'll try it on and if you like it you've got it.' He came in and flipped out. He said it was one of the greatest things he ever heard." We should point out here that, while studios can now perform similar studio tricks on Pro Tools, during this period all the razzle dazzle was achieved using tape!

As we look over this body of work, it's clear that to some extent the music reflects the spirit of the times, but while Miles enjoyed popular success and was seen as the central figure in jazz fusion—Wayne Shorter, Joe Zawinul, John McLaughlin, Billy Cobham, Herbie Hancock, Chick Corea, and Lenny White all recorded with Miles during this period—there came a point in the 70s when his status diminished. While popular groups were making jazz-rock more accessible, Miles performed ever more radical experiments. In other words, 1972's *On the Corner* was *not* the hip-shaking dance-floor craze Corky McCoy's cover would lead record buyers to expect; actually, it sounded more like jazz fusion undergoing electroshock. Although it consisted entirely of previously unreleased material from previous years, 1973's *Big Fun* contained four side-long songs—hardly a recipe for commercial success,

In tandem with producer Teo Macero, Miles treated the studio as a laboratory, and together the two cooked up some wild experiments.

right?—and the last album in this batch, another 2-LP set, 1974's *Get Up with It* presented, along with some previously unreleased older tracks, some radical new material that had some listeners scratching their heads (and not everyone loved Miles' keyboard playing). Also, with so many 2-LP sets coming out in such a short amount of time, Miles may have saturated the market, especially because it took so long to process each new release. And perhaps more than anything, the increasingly negative reaction from critics decreased the likelihood that record buyers would take a chance on a new Miles Davis album.

There's been a reappraisal of those three albums, however, along with all of the LPs on *The Electric Years*, so it's no surprise that VMP's deluxe edition has stirred up a lot of interest. The music was remastered AAA from 1-to-1 tape transfers by Ryan Smith at Sterling Sound, and the vinyl was pressed at GZ. The price for VMP subscribers is $349 while the cost for nonsubscribers is $399. The deluxe edition was packaged with all due care for shipping, which helped to ensure that the outer box, the 24-page booklet, and the individual LPs were in perfect shape when they arrived. I mention that because buying mint original pressings of these LPs at market value would set you back more than this deluxe edition, and because this project was all analog, this well-curated set might be a good choice for some Miles fans—that is, if the remastered vinyl stands up sonically.

And to these ears it does. I sometimes complain of remastered vinyl that's more "objective" or "detached" than the original pressing, but I didn't find that to be the case here. To give just one example, Michael Henderson's bass lines on "Right Off" sound even more vigorous here than on my original pressing of *Jack Johnson* while John McLaughlin's guitar chords and Herbie Hancock's Farfisa organ sound as raw as ever. To address something radically different, I was also impressed by the more introspective cuts, including "In A Silent Way/It's About That Time," "Quiet Fire" from *Big Fun*, and "Sanctuary" from *Bitches Brew*. These are beautiful performances, but a noisy pressing can wipe away the magic. Here, though, a black noise floor allows the music to weave its quiet spell. In fact, the sound is so lucid and transparent that you sense how "locked in" the musicians were as they responded to each other in subtle ways and made exquisite use of space. That sense of "presence" is a sign of a good recording. It takes a lot of work to accurately reproduce what was captured on tape, however—and VMP did a good job of that. tas

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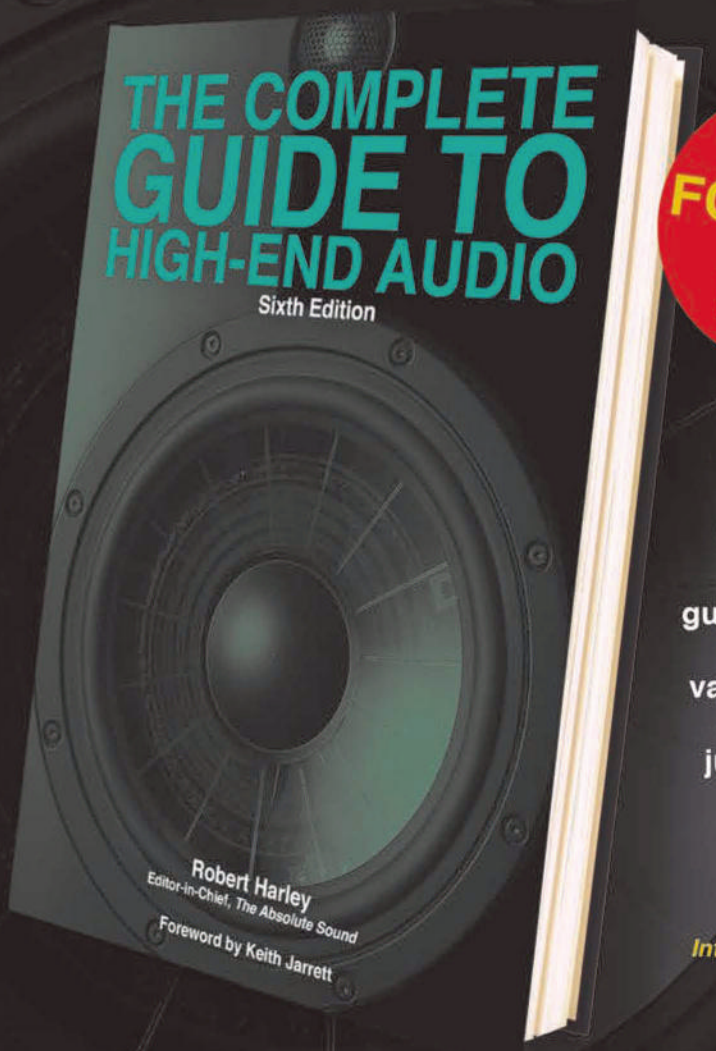

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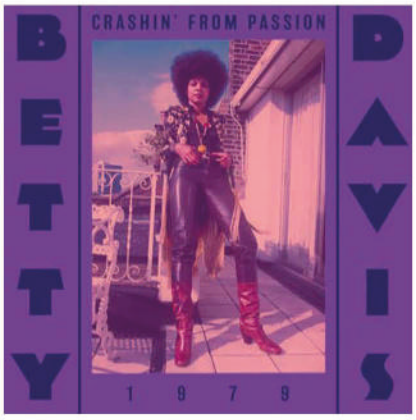
MUSIC ●●●●● SONICS ●●●●○

The Replacements: *Tim: Let it Bleed Edition.* Sire/Rhino (4 CDs + 1 LP).

The fourth deluxe edition compiled from seven Replacements records, *Tim: Let it Bleed Edition* could be their best boxset. From the raw riches of "Hold My Life," "Bastards of Young," and "Left of the Dial" to the forlorn acoustic performance of "Here Comes a Regular," *Tim* is the Replacements' most consistently glorious record, and Westerberg's songwriting exudes a casual brilliance. Despite its top-shelf songs, 1985's *Tim* has often been criticized for producer Tommy Erdelyi's (aka Tommy Ramone) shrouded digital reverb-to-the max mix, 1980s style. Here engineer Ed Stasium remasters *Tim* with a newfound sonic depth and instrumental clarity that accentuate the band's feral ferocity in song. On the *Sons of No One: Rare and Unreleased* tracks disc found here, the buoyant "Can't Hardly Wait" shines as an acoustic demo, and "Nowhere is My Home" tears headlong with the Mats' desperate intensity, Westerberg's bruised vocal, and Bob Stinson's flamethrower guitar riff—and it's produced by Alex Chilton, no less. The Chicago live set, from the opening raunch of "Gary's Got a Boner" to the existential howl of "Unsatisfied," reveals what anyone who ever saw them live in their prime knows: The Replacements were simply one of America's greatest bands. **Greg Gaston**

Further Listening: Bash & Pop: *Friday Night is Killing Me*; The Walkmen: *Bows & Arrows*



MUSIC ●●●●○ SONICS ●●●●○

Betty Davis: *Crashin' from Passion.* Light In the Attic.

For over 15 years, Light In the Attic has been devoted to reissuing the formerly hard-to-find albums by the late funk pioneer and fashion icon, Betty Davis. Albums including *Betty Davis* (1973) and *They Say I'm Different* (1974) cemented her as a bold performer with a distinctive vocal delivery of arresting growls, howls, and belts. This first official release of *Crashin' from Passion* (1979) presents an angle of the singer that is silky and cool as opposed to her previous blazing approach. This shift is clearest on "She's a Woman," a disco-inflected track that recalls the moody groove of Blondie's "Rapture." "No Good at Falling in Love," "Quintessence of Hip," and the title track capture Davis' unmistakable kinetic vigor with restless bass lines and her unfettered vocal permutations. However, some of the record's instrumentals include predictable disco, boogie, and funk musical gestures of the time, such as the undoubtedly catchy "All I Do Is Think of You," which diminish some of the personality prevalent elsewhere on the album. Overall, *Crashin' from Passion* is a fun listen that demonstrates Davis exploring the breadth of her vocal style, but at times lacks the energy and individuality of her previous work. **Hannah Blanchette**

Further Listening: Sylvia: *Sweet Stuff*; Donna Summer: *Bad Girls*; A Taste of Honey: *A Taste of Honey*

MUSIC ●●●●○ SONICS ●●●●○

Madlib: *Shades of Blue (Madlib Invades Blue Note).* Blue Note Classic Vinyl Series (2 LPs).

At the time of this album's original release in 2003, Madlib (Otis Jackson Jr.) was already a popular DJ, MC, music producer, and multi-instrumentalist. When Blue Note opened the music vaults for Madlib to explore its archives, the result was a fusion of jazz and hip-hop that received numerous accolades. Nearly half the music on this album consists of remixes that contain elements from Blue Note's multitrack original recordings. Madlib adds a variety of instruments, including vocals on the remix of Bobby Humphrey's "Please Set Me at Ease," that brings the music's infusion with a hip-hop flavor integrated into the composition. The other tracks are newly produced and recorded interpretations of such Blue Note originals as Wayne Shorter's "Footprints," Horace Silver's "Song for My Father," Reuben Wilson's "Stormy," and a mix of Silver's "Peace" with Herbie Hancock's "Dolphin Dance." Displaying his talents, Madlib plays many of the instruments on this album and uses pseudonyms in the instrumentalist listings. Sonically, the fusion of the two genres works well and provides both jazz and hip-hop afficionados a highly palatable introduction into the works of the other music's form. This double-LP reissue should find a nicely fitting place in the album collection of many. **Andre Jennings**

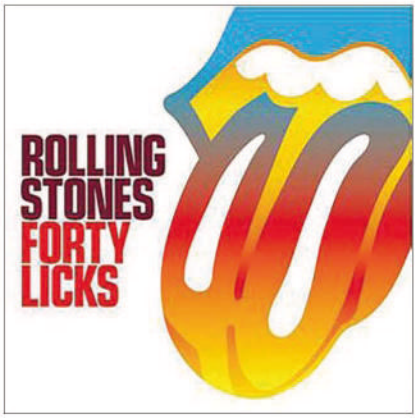
Further Listening: Us3: *Hand on The Torch*

MUSIC ●●●●● SONICS ●●●●○

Run-D.M.C.: ***Raising Hell.*** Profile/Mobile Fidelity (LP).

By the time *Raising Hell* was released, Run-D.M.C. had already established themselves as a premier hip-hop rap group. The trio of Joseph Simmons (Run), Darrel McDaniels (D.M.C.) and Jason Mizell (Jam Master Jay) was introduced to the world with their eponymous first album in 1984, followed by the platinum status-earning *King of Rock* in 1985. In 1986, *Raising Hell* was released, achieving multi-platinum status. Featuring a guest performance by Aerosmith's Steven Tyler and Joe Perry, "Walk This Way" charted higher on the *Billboard* chart than the original song, and the title track also linked together rock-related music with hip-hop. In addition to that hybrid of two different genres, Run-DMC continues the much loved new-school (at the time) style of rapping that is hip-hop at its core, including their unique trading of lyrics interweaving rhymes, a quality that you hear on nearly every track of the album where both rappers perform. Jam Master Jay's hard-hitting beats and percussive mixes keep the rhythms infectious while Run and D.M.C. lay down lyrics that range from fun and entertaining to serious yet still groove-laced. This MoFi treatment is a welcome vinyl reissue of an old favorite that is clean, quiet, and still a fun listen. **AJ**

Further Listening: Whodini: *Back in Black;* Doug E. Fresh & the Get Fresh Crew: *Oh My God!*



MUSIC ●●●●◐ SONICS ●●●●●

The Rolling Stones: ***Forty Licks.*** Universal.

The Stones marked their 40th anniversary in 2002 with a career-spanning 2-CD compilation with 36 hits and four then-new tracks (including the somber Keith Richards solo acoustic number "Losing My Touch"). *Forty Licks* is now available for the first time on vinyl and in all digital formats, including immersive Atmos. *Forty Licks* was the first Stones collection to feature early ABKCO-controlled material and tracks from the Stones own post-1972 label. It's still the definitive anthology. This four-LP set, pressed in Germany on 180-gram vinyl, is packaged in a gatefold cover and includes the CD's original essay and some rare images from the CD. The songs aren't arranged chronologically, though most of the 60s material is gathered on the first two albums, so "Fool to Cry" (1976) follows "Love Is Strong" (1994), which is followed by "Mixed Emotions" (1989), and so on. Overall, the sonics are amazing—"Emotional Rescue" has never sounded better. *Forty Licks* features every iteration of the Stones and such guests and A-list session players as Marianne Faithfull, Don Was, Nicky Hopkins, Sly Dunbar, Doris Troy, Al Kooper, John Paul Jones, Merry Clayton, Blondie Chaplin, and Jack Nitzsche, among others. Think of *Forty Licks* as a ticket to the Stones' vast and infinitely rockin' universe. **Greg Cahill**

Further Listening: Rolling Stones: *More Hot Rocks*

MUSIC ●●●●● SONICS ●●●●●

Black Sabbath: ***Paranoid.*** Quadio Blu-ray. Warner/Rhino.

Batten down the hatches. This sonic powerhouse, first released in 1970 on the heels of Black Sabbath's landmark eponymous debut, spawned three of the UK band's best-known songs: the scathing "War Pigs," "Paranoid," and "Iron Man." This remastered Blu-ray disc contains 24/192-resolution DTS HD Master Quadio 4.0 and DTS-HD Master Stereo mixes transferred from the original half-inch four-channel master tape. The band—singer Ozzy Osbourne, guitarist Tony Iommi, bassist Terry "Geezer" Butler, and drummer Bill Ward—could fire off blistering grooves that laid the foundation for heavy metal and its progeny. But the quad mix also spotlights the intimate jazz-inflected "Planet Caravan," especially Iommi's tasteful guitar part. On "Rat Salad," engineer Mike Butcher took full advantage of the then-fledgling quad format, using the format to add excitement to Ward's stunning drum solo and panning Iommi's guitar outro on "Fairies Wear Boots" around the room. Ozzy's vocals to the dirge-like "Electric Funeral" are chilling when heard in the rear speakers. The lyrics of these songs have retained relevancy, decrying war, alienation in an industrialized society, and impending environmental disaster. The Quadio *Paranoid* offers a new perspective on an old classic. Play it loud. **GC**

Further Listening: Chicago: *The Quadio Box*

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The Doors: *Live at the Matrix 1967: The Original Masters.* Rhino.

Many Doors fans would love to go back in time and be on hand when the band performed for five nights at the Matrix in San Francisco in March 1967. At that point the group was young, hungry, and poised for success, as two months before they'd released a superb debut album on a major label. In concert, the L.A.-based foursome could play material off their eponymous debut, plus they had they could play some unreleased originals that were equally impressive. They could cover blues songs (including "Crawlin' King Snake," which would later surface on 1971's *L.A. Woman*), play jazz standards, and throw in covers of "Money" and Van Morrison's "Gloria." Peter Abram taped those Matrix performances, and bits and pieces of the recordings have trickled out ever since, first in bootleg form and later in official releases. Recently Rhino assembled all the salvageable material, including everything previously mentioned and more. The result is *Live at the Matrix 1967*, which contains 37 cuts and is available as a 3-CD or 5-LP set. So while time travel is *not* an option, listeners can begin to imagine attending these shows that few people saw because the leadoff single from *The Doors*, "Break on Through," was a flop; it wasn't until "Light My Fire" hit the airwaves in April that The Doors exploded.

Sonically the box set betters the bootlegs as well as an official release that unknowingly worked from third-generation tapes. Still, it's a far cry from, say, *Absolutely Live*. For me, listening to this set sparked comparisons to two posthumous live Velvet Underground releases, *1969 Live* and *The Quine Tapes*, which both involved unofficial recordings in small venues. While *1969 Live* sounds better than *Quine*, even the more sonically challenged *Quine* is, for me at least, an engaging listen. When the Velvets create abrasive walls of sound (during "Heroin," for example), I can disregard the audio blemishes and connect with the music. On *Live at the Matrix*, The Doors make their own musical mayhem—during the raveups on "The End" and "When the Music's Over," for example—but their instrumental freakouts don't have as much impact. Partly that's because much of the action takes place in one channel, and while you'd like Robby Krieger to stand out more during the loudest passages, you can hear his guitar, but surely he was higher in the mix at the Matrix. This isn't a snooty audiophile dissing a bad recording, by the way, as there's no question in my mind that this music is worth documenting, sonic warts and all. For me, though, the most engaging moments occur when the volume drops way down ("The Crystal Ship," "Summer's Almost Gone," Krieger's hypnotic guitar intro to "The End") and you can begin to imagine the spell The Doors wove in front of the crowd on those five evenings.

Due to its sonic defects, does *Live at the Matrix* make sense solely for hardcore Doors fanatics? Not really. At $30, the CD costs about the same as two cocktails and may get you more intoxicated. The 5-LP set will set you back $125, and that still doesn't sound too exorbitant. Heck, I've held onto the *Moonlight Drive* bootleg I purchased in the previous millennium, and why not? After all, it's a piece of history—and so, now, is *Live at the Matrix*. **Jeff Wilson**

Further Listening: Nico: *The End*; X: *Los Angeles*; Blue Oyster Cult: *Tyranny and Mutation*; Morphine: *Cure for Pain*

MUSIC ●●●●◐ SONICS ●●●●○

Morphine: *The Night.* DreamWorks/Light in the Attic (2 LPs).

The core instrumentation for Morphine (drums, two-string electric bass, baritone saxophone, vocals) sounds like a recipe for lo-fi recordings, but the post-punk threesome consistently made albums that were sonically alluring, the aural equivalent of film noir and the perfect correlative to the dark lyrics of songwriter and vocalist Mark Sandman. Even Morphine's most minimal recordings sound good, as if the absence of guitar and keyboards helped open things up. Occasionally other instruments were added to the mix, but it wasn't until their final album, *The Night* (2000), that Morphine really broadened its palette, sprinkling in, on different cuts, viola, cello, oud, organ, hand drum, double bass, frame drum, acoustic guitar, background vocalists, and vocal effects. The result was a wild ride where drone-like performances ("Like a Mirror," "Rope on Fire") were sandwiched between such turbo-charged fare as "Top Floor, Bottom Buzzer" and "A Good Woman Is Hard to Find." *The Night* never repeats itself, and at times it reminds me of *Swordfishtrombones*-era Tom Waits. The first-ever vinyl release of *The Night*, Light in the Attic's 2-LP set fills an important gap, and the sound is open, spacious, and immediate. Sadly, Sandman died before the album was mixed, but clearly he ended on a high note. **JW**

Further Listening: Mark Lanegan: *Straight Songs of Sorrow*; Morphine: *Like Swimming* (Light in the Attic)

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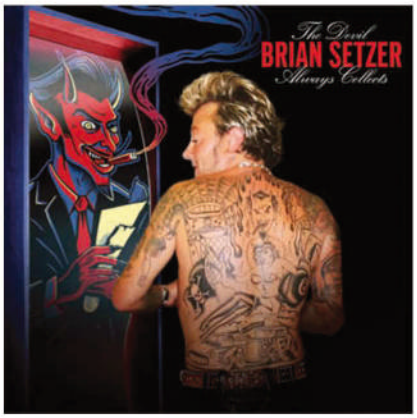
MUSIC ●●●●○ SONICS ●●●●○

Christone "Kingfish" Ingram: *Live in London.* Alligator (2 CDs).

Despite his first album being Grammy nominated and his second being Grammy winning, Mississippi bluesman Christone "Kingfish" Ingram remained a "you gotta see him live" artist. Which is not to suggest his studio efforts are under-produced: in Tom Hambridge, as producer and songwriting collaborator, he's working with one of the best in the business. No, the rep has to do with capturing on disc the visceral force and assured versatility of Kingfish on stage, both as daring musician and powerful vocalist. Correcting the record, so to speak, the double-CD *Live in London* delivers a grand showcase of Kingfish's artistry over the course of 15 tunes, beginning with set opener "She Called Me Kingfish," which rises from DeShawn Alexander's smooth jazz organ intro into a stinging rebuke—lyrically and instrumentally—of a feckless gal, with Kingfish burning both hot and meditative over the course of seven minutes-plus. From the two studio albums come powerful performances of gems such as the jazzy reflection "Another Life Goes By" and the touching classic soul of "Rock & Roll," a tribute to the artist's late mother; but two new songs—including a scintillating 10-minute instrumental, "Mississippi Night"—tell us Kingfish is aiming for higher ground. **David McGee**

Further Listening: B.B. King: *Blues is King;* Popa Chubby and the Beast Band: *Live at G. Bluey's Juke Joint NYC*



MUSIC ●●●●◐ SONICS ●●●●●

Brian Setzer: *The Devil Always Collects.* Surfdog.

Once again demonstrating his unflagging affinity for flat-out, ass-quaking, oxygen depleting, guitar-driven rock 'n' roll, Brian Setzer arguably has never been better at it than he is on the red-hot *The Devil Always Collects*. From the merciless six-string fusillade unleashed on the album opening "Rock Boy Rock" (goosed along by a bevy of distaff backup singers chanting with gusto and innuendo, "Rock, boys, rock/ Plug it in the box and show me what you got!") to the lusty blasts of speed-picked hollow body fury reinvigorating Del Reeves' 1965 country chart topper, "The Girl on the Billboard," and the Stonesish overtones of the stomping wink-and-a-nod of the horn-infused "She's Got a Lotta…Soul," Setzer keeps the pedal to the metal, his expressive singing perfectly complementing the multitude of white-hot riffs and multitudinous dazzling instrumental ideas he offers with unceasing grandeur. Aside from the skirt-chasing going on, Setzer celebrates unalloyed, testosterone-rich music making in a blitzkrieg assault titled "Play That Fast Thing (One More Time)," its arrangement propelled by rollicking blues piano and powerhouse drums framing the Stray Cat as he works the length and breadth of his instrument's tonal possibilities to maximum propulsive effect. It'll rock your town and mine tonight and every night hereafter. **DM**

Further Listening: Eddie Cochran and Gene Vincent: *Town Hall Party*

MUSIC ●●●●○ SONICS ●●●●○

Be Your Own Pet: *Mommy.* Third Man Records.

Garage punk outfit Be Your Own Pet met a sudden and premature end in 2008, and their triumphant return 15 years later is irreverent, sexy, and political while continuing to seamlessly blend the humor and honesty they were once known for. Here frontperson Jemina Pearl sings and wails her way through the challenges of adult life, commenting on mental health, sexism, and getting older and wiser. Topics and hooks that could have sounded trite by anyone else are delivered with such conviction by Pearl that they all *work*. Like how the album's evocative earworm opener "Worship the Whip"—which compares conservatives to sexual masochists—is followed by the lighthearted "Goodtime!" where Be Your Own Pet recognize they aren't as young as they used to be. The band's musicality is on full display, too, as they lean heavily into late 70s and 80s sounds—hints of Blondie, the B-52s, Billy Idol, glam, and Britpop augment their gritty punk. Other standout tracks include the massive "Pleasure Seeker," groovy "Rubberist," and overt feminist anthem "Big Trouble." The few more forgettable songs on the album fail to detract from its unbridled passion and enthusiasm. Thank god—and Third Man Records—Be Your Own Pet is back. **Jerika Hayes**

Further Listening: Pinkshift: *Love Me Forever*

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Les McCann: *Never a Dull Moment!—Live from Coast to Coast (1966–1967).* Resonance Records.

MUSIC ●●●●○ SONICS ●●●●◐

Joe Alterman Plays Les McCann: Big Mo & Little Joe. Joe Alterman Music.

In the mid to late 1960s, the permeable musical genre known as "soul jazz" yielded a number of pop hits, including the Ramsey Lewis Trio's version of "The 'In' Crowd" (1965) and Cannonball Adderley's "Mercy, Mercy, Mercy" (1966). The biggest was Les McCann and Eddie Harris' rendition of Gene McDaniels' "Compared to What" (1969). It's no coincidence that all three were recorded in concert. Rooted in gospel, blues, and hard-bop, soul jazz communicated its spirit most convincingly in clubs and on festival stages, and that same sense of immediacy and in-person excitement animates *Never a Dull Moment*, the new three-LP (and three-CD) set of pianist McCann's live trio recordings from the Penthouse Jazz Club in Seattle and the Village Vanguard in New York City. The Seattle performances were taped in early 1966 for radio broadcast on KING-FM (with one bonus track from 1963), and the eight tracks from the July 1967 Vanguard dates were caught on a two-track tape recorder by Resonance Records founder George Klabin, who collaborated on the sound restoration before Bernie Grundman mastered the recordings for 180-gram vinyl.

McCann, now 88, is no longer able to play or perform, but he approved of the reissue project and is no doubt relishing the renewed interest in his life's work. In 2015, musician and reissue specialist Pat Thomas helped McCann compile an anthology of photographs, *Invitation to Openness: The Jazz and Soul Photography of Les McCann 1960–1980*. And in August 2023, McCann's de facto protégé and pal, Joe Alterman, released *Big Mo & Little Joe*, with his piano trio playing ten McCann pieces and one Alterman-McCann co-composition. Both Thomas and Alterman contributed notes to *Never a Dull Moment!*'s photo-rich 21-page booklet.

McCann played piano with technical assurance and consummate ease. He was sometimes flashy, frenetically busy, occasionally florid. But he never overreached to innovate or keep up with the moderns. He was all about joy and soul. He found and gave pleasure as a musical entertainer who could fill a room with funk and feeling. At the Penthouse in 1966, his rhythm section was bassist Stanley Gilbert and drummer Paul Humphrey; Tony Bazley subbed on drums for one night. Bazley and bassist Victor Gaskin are on the track from 1963. At the Village Vanguard, McCann was supported by bassist Leroy Vinnegar and drummer Frank Severino. Each trio alignment was totally locked into the groove at every tempo. Buoyant melodies dance above foot-tapping rhythms, and you can almost see the harmonies grinning.

Whereas standards by the likes of Dizzy Gillespie, Cole Porter, Harry Warren, Bobby Hebb ("Sunny"), and Steve Allen ("This Could Be the Start of Something Big") slightly outnumber McCann originals on *Never a Dull Moment!*, Joe Alterman goes all in on his hero's compositions on *Big Mo & Little Joe*. Joined by bassist Kevin Smith and drummer Justin Chesarek, Alterman honors every phase of McCann. His playing is economical, his swing relentless, his flair judicious, and his dedication to McCann's legacy is a perfect complement to the soul-jazz master's resurrected live recordings. **Derk Richardson**

Further Listening: Les McCann/Eddie Harris: *Swiss Movement*

MUSIC ●●●●◐ SONICS ●●●●○

Matthew Shipp: *Circular Temple.* ESP-Disk' (LP).

In 1990, the same year he went into the studio for his debut as a member of saxophonist David S. Ware's history quartet, 29-year-old pianist Matthew Shipp recorded his initial trio date as a leader. Now available for the first time on vinyl, *Circular Temple* offers an early and revelatory glimpse into the kaleidoscopic musical strategies and techniques that Shipp has used over the past three-plus decades to ever greater expressive effect in myriad collaborative (as well as solo) settings. The 47-minute suite comprises four movements. "Circular Temple #1," "#2" (Monk's Nightmare)," and "#3" (a both gritty and cosmic duet by bassist William Parker and drummer Whit Dickey) occupy side one of the LP, and "#4" (a 26½-minute tour de force that moves from solo piano into trio magic) fills up side two. Influences—Duke Ellington, Thelonious Monk, Bud Powell, McCoy Tyner, Cecil Taylor, and, as the late John Farris mentions in his original line notes, Bach, Debussy, and Chopin—fade quickly in the trio's spontaneous creation of what Shipp has called a "kinetic garden of sound" and "a sacred architecture." This is where you can hear the seeds sprouting and foundations poured for Shipp's arrival as a giant of 21st-century piano music. **DR**

Further Listening: Matthew Shipp Trio: *World Construct*; Matthew Shipp: *The Intrinsic Nature of Shipp*

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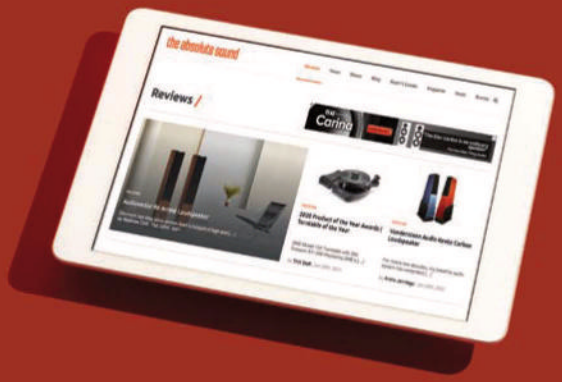

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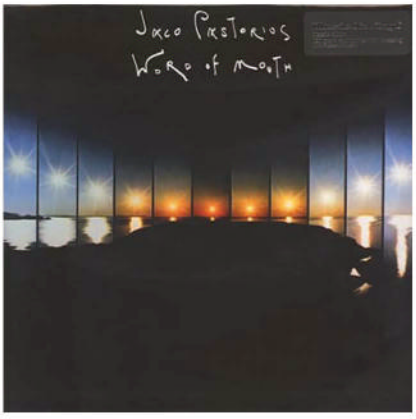
MUSIC ●●●●○ SONICS ●●●●●

Leroy Vinnegar: *Leroy Walks!* Contemporary/Craft Recordings (LP).

Readers who buy this reissue will experience the pinnacle of natural recorded sound. The wonderful musicians on this remastered vinyl were recorded by Contemporary Records in the mid-50s and the result is one of the most natural audio recordings you will hear, thanks to recording engineer Roy DuNann's masterful work. Prominently featured is the "walking" bass of Leroy Vinnegar, and as Nat Hentoff notes in the original liner notes, "walking" in jazz is establishing a lively, four-beats-to-the-bar rhythm. Creating a proper repetitive bottom foundation for an ensemble demands feeling and emotional understanding. Leroy had that to the nines. The performance here is a fascinating combination of East Coast/West Coast music, which just also happens to have exquisite piano work by Carl Perkins (recorded deliciously by DuNann). Most of the tunes are taken at a slow or medium-slow pace, giving the proceedings a very relaxed, laid-back feel, and at times the performances can even sound like some of the Hollywood movie music of that era, but very hip nonetheless. Craft has done an impeccable job with both the mastering and pressing on this all-analogue reissue. And most importantly, Craft has provided a natural window to the stunning tonality and feel of this original analog recording. **Jonathan Horwich**

Further Listening: Curtis Counce: *You Get More Bounce with Curtis Counce!*



MUSIC ●●●●● SONICS ●●●●●

Jaco Pastorius: *Word of Mouth.* Warner/Rhino High Fidelity.

Jaco's magnum opus represents the realization of the promise that he showed on his 1976 self-titled debut. During those five years in between recordings, he accelerated his development as electric bass phenom and enthralling concert attraction in Weather Report, the premier fusion band of the day. While challenging dominant leader and synth maestro Joe Zawinul on a nightly basis, Jaco also brought to the band such memorable tunes as "Teen Town," "Havona," and "Punk Jazz." *Word of Mouth* was crafted on a much larger canvas than any of Jaco's previous works, more beholden to Stravinsky and Bach than James Brown and Wayne Cochran. And while his bass virtuosity is apparent on Bach's "Chromatic Fantasy," the Beatles' "Blackbird," and his cathartic "Crisis," it's the gorgeous orchestral rendering of his poignant waltz, "Three Views of a Secret," the suite-like "John and Mary," and the jaunty "Liberty City" that most impress here. Guest soloists include Michael Brecker, Herbie Hancock, Wayne Shorter, and Toots Thielemans. Originally released in July of 1981, *Word of Mouth* was Jaco's first post-Weather Report album. Now reissued as a 180-gram vinyl pressing with glossy covers and heavyweight gatefold jacket, it more than stands the test of time. **Bill Milkowski**

Further Listening: Jaco Pastorius: *Invitation; The Birthday Concert*

MUSIC ●●●●◐ SONICS ●●●●◐

Thad Jones: *Detroit-New York Junction.* Blue Note/Third Man.

The first vinyl release from a new alliance between Blue Note and Third Man's Detroit-based mastering/pressing facility—dubbed the 313 Series Partnership—kicks off in spirited fashion with *Detroit-New York Junction.* The analog sound on this 1956 small group session is warm and inviting. You can feel Oscar Pettiford's formidable bass lines on the relaxed mid-tempo "Blue Room" alongside drummer Shadow Wilson's lightly grooving brushwork. Pianist Tommy Flanagan, who comps elegantly throughout this session, contributes a sterling solo here, as do guitarist Kenny Burrell and underrated tenor saxophonist Billy Mitchell. But it's the leader who really sets the bar high with a plucky hard bop solo on this opener. "Tarriff" is a runaway swinger with Jones and Mitchell navigating tight unisons through an intricate head. The Rodgers and Hart chestnut, "Little Girl Blue," though a bit mawkish, showcases some excellent chordal work from Burrell in a stripped-down trio setting with bowed bass and trumpet. Jones' jaunty "Scratch" features some of the leader's strongest bop-fueled blowing of the session while the burning closer, "Zec," gives everybody a solo taste. Originally produced by Blue Note co-founder Alfred Lion, this mid-50s landmark still excites today. **BM**

Further Listening: Thad Jones: *The Magnificent Thad Jones*; Kenny Burrell/Tommy Flanagan: *Jazz Men: Detroit*

MUSIC ●●●●○ SONICS ●●●○○

Buddy Rich: *Trios.* Lightyear.

The enduring image of drummer Buddy Rich is of him sitting at his kit, amidst his big band and its wailing brass section, the players standing behind screens emblazoned with a crest featuring the initials "BR," as Rich blasts away at one of his electrifying solos. On rare occasions, he might show up in a smaller ensemble, uncharacteristically modest, notably in the beloved Verve recording *Ella and Louis*. Those intimate arrangements became more frequent towards the end of Rich's career, such as on these 1976 and 1977 live recordings of a trio, including pianist Barry Kiener on all tracks and bass players Jon Burr and Tom Warrington. The remastering of sonically defective tapes by Tom Swift is excellent, capturing a smoky, clubby ambience of clinking glasses and happy chatter, as Rich drives the program of mostly standards along with elegant brushstrokes. But the star of the recording, and the main reason to recommend acquiring it, is the superbly elegant and joyful pianism of the wunderkind Kiener, a member of Rich's big band, who spins out streams of Tatum-like pearly lyricism. His career was cut short less than a decade after these recordings were made, when he died of a heroin overdose at age 30, making this recording a rare glimpse of a lost master. **Peter Burwasser**

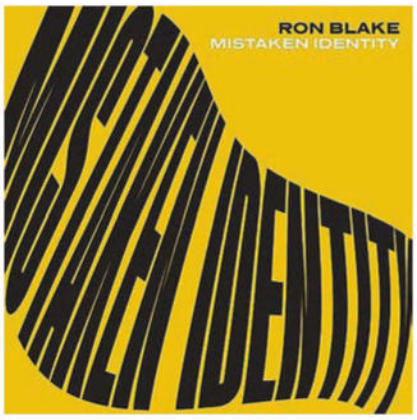
Further Listening: Ella Fitzgerald and Louis Armstrong: *Ella and Louis*

MUSIC ●●●●○ SONICS ●●●●●

Joy: *Joy.* Cadillac.

Although none of the excellent musicians who made up the tight-knit quintet called Joy ever achieved much name recognition in the US, their music should appeal to listeners who have tuned into London-based groups lead by South African immigrants like Chris McGregor and Dudu Pukwana, or Brits who adopted their lead in the 60s and 70s, like Elton Dean and Keith Tippett. Most of the musicians in these bands played in other styles as well, from rock to modern jazz to free improvisation. Here, alto saxophonist Chris Francis, trumpeter Jim Dvorak, and pianist Frank Roberts generally adhere to post-bop and modal norms when soloing, but the rhythm section is another matter. South African bassist Ernest Mothle doesn't mind repetitive patterns, and drummer Keith Bailey sounds more like a rock drummer than a jazzer. Music like this is sometimes categorized as jazz-rock, but while it does have crossover appeal—in fact a lot of it seems all but irresistible—it doesn't sound like US-based fusion. This is, rather, a style unto itself that rewards serious listening without sounding "difficult" to neophytes. Production values for the LP reissue are state of the art, and the CD version includes several previously unreleased live tracks. **Duck Baker**

Further Listening: The Blue Notes: *Township Bop*; Elton Dean's Ninesense: *Happy Daze*



MUSIC ●●●●○ SONICS ●●●●◐

Ron Blake: *Mistaken Identity.* 7tēn33 Productions.

Tenor and baritone saxophonist/composer/educator Ron Blake seemed to be very busy from the early 90s to the mid-oughts, playing in bands led by Roy Hargrove, Christian McBride, and Art Farmer, making four CDs as a leader, and appearing on a long list of other releases as a sideman, but then he seemed to disappear. As it turns out, Blake remained active due to a couple of steady gigs, playing baritone saxophone in the Saturday Night Live band since 2005 and teaching jazz saxophone at Julliard since 2007. On *Mistaken Identity*, his first recording as a leader in 15 years, Blake joins forces with a longtime collaborator, guitarist Bobby Broom. The bass duties are held down by Reuben Rogers and Nat Reeves while Kobie Watkins plays drums on this nine-selection program. Along with Johnny Griffith's beautiful ballad "When We Were One," the group's medium-tempo interpretations of compositions by jazz greats Duke Pearson ("Is That So"), Sonny Rollins ("Allison") and Benny Golson ("Stablemates") immediately caught my ear because of the great recorded sound and Blake's imaginative soloing. Other highlights include Broom's "No Hype Blues" and the title track, a calypso written by steel pan player Victor Provost that features Blake on baritone sax. Welcome back, Ron! **Greg Turner**

Further Listening: Brandon Sanders: *Compton's Finest*; Bobby Broom: *Bobby Broom Plays for Monk*

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MUSIC ●●●●○ SONICS ●●●●○

Igor Levit: *Fantasia.* Music of Bach, Busoni, Liszt, and Berg. Sony.

Like a lot of today's younger artists, Igor Levit, who's still in his 30s, has a thing for concept albums. It's not a bad thing. Witness this thematic "double album" from Sony, devoted to two works by each of four composers either written or arranged for the keyboard. Levit's selection contains a great deal of musical interest, and the pieces are placed in thoughtful juxtaposition—the kind of thing Serkin and Brendel used to do in their day.

The big items here are the Liszt B minor Sonata—the biggest item in a lot of pianists' playbooks—and the *Fantasia Contrappuntistica* (1910) of Busoni. Each one dominates half of the program and takes upwards of half an hour to play. But Levit's offering begins with Bach, as many a recital does. The warm-up is the Air from the Orchestral Suite No. 3 (known colloquially, in the days before strippers, as the "Air on the G string"), as arranged for piano by Alexander Siloti, no mean virtuoso himself. Of course, there's nothing remotely fiery about the Air, but its "angelic," "lost to the world" feeling makes for a nice beginning. It's followed by Bach's great *Chromatic Fantasy and Fugue* in D minor, BWV 903, in a mesmerizing performance. Levit gives us very much a modern piano sound and a modern approach to the notes, but is completely convincing; in the fugue, the voices are clear, the touch light.

Next comes a blazing account of the Liszt sonata, strong, but not heavy, powerful, but offering an amazingly clear exposition of the piece's harmonies and textures. Levit has fantastic fingers; if anything, he makes the writing seem almost too easy. But I think Liszt would have approved of the storm without the stress here, and would certainly have welcomed the element of "fantasy" Levit brings to his realization. The first part of the double album comes to a wonderful close with the Liszt arrangement of "Der Doppelgänger" from Schubert's *Schwanengesang*—which flows directly from the final notes of the sonata, in the same B minor. Levit gives a passionate performance, the hanging reverb of the sustained low block chords filling the listener's soul like the tolling of bells.

The second half of the album begins with Alban Berg's very brief *Klavierstück* in B minor, which sounds an awful lot like Brahms (as if to remind us of how much a Romantic Berg was) but proves a wonderful setup for Berg's Opus 1 Sonata. Tonally a far more elusive work—it ends in B minor almost in spite of itself—the sonata receives an outstanding realization, notable for both its mood and color.

Heading up the final twofer, Busoni's *Fantasia Contrappuntistica*, based on Bach's *Art of Fugue*, seems the most fantasia-like of all the pieces here, indeterminate in tonality, with chromatic smearings galore. It's hard as nails to pull off, but almost *de rigueur* for a virtuoso of Levit's caliber, especially one based in Berlin, as Busoni was for many years.

Levit's performance, of this and of the concluding fillip, Busoni's *Nuit de Noël* (1908), leaves nothing to be desired.

The recording, made in February and April of 2023 in Hanover's Leibniz Saal (formerly the "Beethoven Saal"), captures Levit's truly remarkable tone with excellent presence and immediacy, and no hardness of sound. Credit producer/engineer Andreas Neubronner for a job well done. **Ted Libbey**

Further Listening: Beethoven: The Complete Piano Sonatas (Levit/Sony); *On DSCH* (Levit/Sony)

MUSIC ●●●●○ SONICS ●●●●○

Frid: The Complete Works for Violin and Piano. Isabelle van Keulen, Oliver Triendl. Challenge Records.

The pride of the Soviet Union was not necessarily its tanks and missiles, but its vast cultural apparatus, especially in the realm of classical music. Remarkably, more than a generation since the demise of the USSR there are still great performers and composers to be discovered, mainly from artists who, for whatever reasons, did not travel beyond the Iron Curtain. Grigory Frid, a composer who lived from 1915 to 2012, is a vivid example of this phenomenon. He grew up in Siberia, where his family had been exiled by Stalin. A number of his relatives died in the great purges, or on the battlefields of World War Two. Not surprisingly, much of his output is emotionally dark, even tragic, in the manner of his friend and near contemporary Shostakovich. And yet there is also a brightly humanistic side to his musical voice, including a number of works on this collection of his music for violin and piano. His 1952 Violin Sonata sounds like it might have been written by Brahms. The jocular, brilliantly constructed music of another of his famous compatriots, Prokofiev, also serves as an inspiration. This music is a real find; hopefully a Frid revival will roll on. **Peter Burwasser**

Further Listening: Frid: Phädra, Piano Quintet (Elisaveta Blumina, Vogler Quartet/Capriccio)

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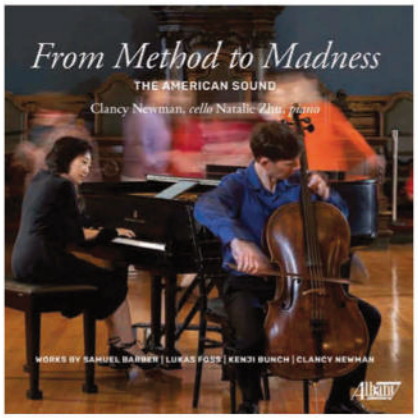

MUSIC ●●●●○ SONICS ●●●●○

From Method to Madness: The American Sound. Clancy Newman, cello; Natalie Zhu, piano. Albany.

The four works here for cello and piano have at least two things in common; they are all written by young men (all under the age of 30 at the time of the premieres) who are also American. Samuel Barber's imposing three movement Cello Sonata, penned when he was still a Curtis student, almost immediately became a mainstay of the cello repertoire. Like all of the music on this recital, it is based on a familiar format, in this case the classical sonata. Lukas Foss, who was German born but spent all of his adult life as a naturalized American citizen, is represented by a charming and lively *Capriccio*, described by the composer as a "combination of Bach, humor and American characteristics." Kenji Bunch's brilliant *Broken Music* uses that term with irony, referring to musical conventions that break apart chords, rhythms, and dynamics. The work is in four distinctive sections. The program closes with a brief work written by Clancy Newman for a cello competition, and thus, appropriately virtuosic, with an intentionally formalistic opening eventually bursting into a rollicking, jazzy finale. Newman and Zhu play together as if they are longtime friends and colleagues, which in fact they are. **PB**

Further Listening: American Piano Concertos (Xiayin, Oundjian/Chandos)

MUSIC ●●●●● SONICS ●●●●●

Éventail. Holliger, Kernjak. ECM.

Swiss oboist Heinz Holliger established his celebrated career with popular recordings of baroque and classical era standards but has always had another side of his artistic life as a modernist composer and staunch supporter of music of other living composers. This delightful new recording finds him somewhat in between those two worlds with a program of French music of the 20th century, nearly all of it tonal and accessible. Holliger is accompanied by the fine Austrian pianist Anton Kernjak on most of the tracks, in material that leans lyrical, even rhapsodic, in a particularly Gallic character. Only the work of Jolivet, his 1968 *Controversia*, which features a harp accompanist, bristles a bit harmonically, but in a playful way. At the other end of the stylistic spectrum is the music of a young Messiaen, who was capable of creating startlingly raucous music in his later work. His 1935 *Vocalise-Étude*, still highly influenced by Debussy, flows with ravishing beauty. The ECM label has a venerable reputation for stellar, if rather stark production values and wonderful recorded sound in both jazz and classical material, and this release is no exception, in which Holliger's gorgeous tone and elegant phrasing are captured with vivid realism. **PB**

Further Listening: J.S. Bach: Sinfonias; C.P.E. Bach; Vivaldi (Leppard, Holliger/Pentatone)

MUSIC ●●●●● SONICS ●●●●●

Holst: *The Planets.* Williams: *Star Wars Suite.* LA Philharmonic, Zubin Mehta, conductor. Decca (SACD).

Zubin Mehta's Decca recording of Gustav Holst's *The Planets* has always been a popular audiophile favorite because of its excellent sound and interpretation. Now it finally appears for the first time on SACD coupled with Mehta's dynamic performance of the suite from *Star Wars*. Virtually all of Mehta's tempos for *The Planets* are just about perfect. Combine that with the sound and nicely terraced dynamics, and you have arguably the best available recording of *The Planets*. The same is true of *Star Wars*. He doesn't play down to the fact that it is film music. His approach is as serious as it is dynamic. In comparison, even Charles Gerhardt with the amazing sound of the RCA Classic Film Score Series sounds underplayed. The sound on the original Decca recordings was excellent in just about every way (as were most of Mehta's Decca Los Angeles recordings), and the long-awaited SACD is even better, especially in its fine inner detail and clean, warm bass (the organ). The blending of the organ pedal with the orchestra at the end of "Saturn" is stunning. The only problem is its availability in the United States. The SACD was made in Japan and the price is likely to be outrageous if you can find it. **Arthur Lintgen**

Further Listening: Richard Strauss: *Also Sprach Zarathustra* (Los Angeles Philharmonic, Mehta/Decca)

Ad Index

Aaudio Imports 117
aaudioimports.com
Accuphase 113
accuphase.com
Acoustic Signature 96, 97
acoustic-signature.com
Aesthetix 111
aesthetix.net
Analog Audio Design 183
analogaudiodesign.com
Aqua Acoustic Quality 43
aquahifi.com
Atma-Sphere 14
atma-sphere.com
Audience ..... Cover IV
audience-av.com
Audio Physic 161
chariohifi.com
Audio Skies 79
audioskies.com
Audioarts NYC 77
audioartsnyc.com
AudioQuest ..... Cover II
audioquest.com
Audiovector 35
audiovector.com
Avantgarde Acoustic Lautsprecher Systeme Gmbh ..99
avantgarde-acoustic.de
Axiss Audio 69, 113
axissaudio.com
AXPONA Audio Expo North America, LLC 177
AXPONA.com
Basis Audio 41
basisaudio.com
Bel Canto Design 115
belcantodesign.com
Bending Wave USA 59
bendingwaveusa.com
Burmester Audiosysteme GmbH 29
burmester.de
Cable Company 50, 51
thecableco.com
CH Precision 57
ch-precision.com
Clearaudio 102
musicalsurroundings.com
Complete Guide to High End Audio 158, 174
hifibooks.com
Constellation 95
constellationaudio.com
Crystal Cable 25
crystalcable.com
DALI Loudspeakers 55
dali-speakers.com
Dan D'Agostino Master Audio Systems 49
dandagostino.com
dCS 9, 87
dCSaudio.com
DS Audio 89
musicalsurroundings.com
Dynaudio North America, Inc. 157
dynaudio.com
Elite AV Distribution 181
eliteavdist.com
Elusive Disc 108
elusivedisc.com
Emerald Physics 65
underwoodhifi.com
EnKlein 165
EnKlein.com
Esprit Cables 159
esprit-audio.fr
Fidelis Distribution 91
fidelisdistribution.com
Focal Naim America ..... Cover III
focalnaimamerica.com
Furutech 119
furutech.com
GoldenEar Technology 13
goldenear.com
Gryphon Audio Designs Aps 33
gryphon-audio.dk
Hana by Excel Sound 18
hanacartridges.com
Harbeth Audio Ltd. 91
harbeth.co.uk
Harmonic Resolution Systems 47
avisolation.com
Harmonic Technology 109
harmonictech.com
HearThis LLC 81
hearthis.us
HiFi Rose 131
hifirose.com
Hi-Fi+ 183
hifiplus.com
JMF Audio 79
jmf-audio.com
Kef America 22, 93
kef.com
Kimber Kable 67
kimber.com
Kuzma Ltd. 181
kuzma.si
Legacy Audio 138
legacyaudio.com
Linkwitz 163
linkwitz.audio
Linn Incorporated 60, 61
linn.co.uk/try-linn
Lumin Music Systems 85
luminmusic.com
Magico, LLC 3
MagicoAudio.com
MartinLogan 21
martinlogan.com
MBL North America, Inc. 19
mblnorthamerica.com
Metaxas & Sins BV 137
metaxas.com
MoFi Distribution 131
mofidistribution.com
MoFi Electronics 31
mofielectronics.com
Monarch Systems Ltd. 161
monarch-systems.com
Monitor Audio 155
monitoraudiousa.com
Music Direct 105, 172, 173
musicdirect.com
Musical Surroundings 18, 89, 102
musicalsurroundings.com
Neotech Marketing Group Inc 103
neotechcable.com
NuPrime Audio 126
nuprimeaudio.com
Pass Laboratories 107
passlabs.com
PrimaLuna USA 151
primaluna-usa.com
Pro Audio Ltd 183
proaudio@comcast.net
PS Audio 167
psaudio.com
PSB Speakers 27
psbspeakers.com
Rhapsody.Audio 141
rhapsodynyc.com
Rockport Technologies 71
rockporttechnologies.com
Rogue Audio 91
rogueaudio.com
Roksan 39
monitoraudiousa.com
Scott Walker Audio 125
scottwalkeraudio.com
Shunyata Research 6, 7
shunyata.com
Siltech 15
siltechcables.com
Snake River Audio 115
snakeriveraudio.com
SOtM 137
sotm-audio.com
Soulution 69
soulution-audio.com
Sound Organisation 83
soundorg.com
Soundings HiFi 181
soundingshifi.com
Source Systems, Ltd. 85
sourcesystemsltd.com
Stenheim Suisse SA 153
stenheim.com
Stillpoints 126
stillpoints.us
StromTank 163
stromtank.us
Suncoast Audio 121
suncoastaudio.com
T+A 149
ta-hifi.com
Tannoy 75, 135
tannoy.com
TAS Illustrated History of High-End Audio 140, 178
store.theabsolutesound.com
TAS Subscription Information 114, 129, 189
theabsolutesound.com
TAS You Tube Channel 187
YouTube.com/@TheTASmagazine
Technics 45
technics.com
The Voice That Is 52, 133
thevoicethatis.com
TheAbsoluteSound.com 183, 184
theabsolutesound.com
Ultra Systems 127
ultrasystems.com
Underwood HiFi Inc. 65
underwoodhifi.com
United Home Audio 181
unitedhomeaudio.com
Upscale Audio 171
upscaleaudio.com
Upscale Distribuiton 35, 75, 151
upscaledistribution.com
UsedCable.com 181
thecableco.com
Valve Amplification Co. (VAC) 73
vac-amps.com
Vitus Audio 101
vitusaudio.com
Voodoo Cable LLC 123
voodoocable.net
Wadax SA 11
wadax.eu
Westminster Lab 81
hearthis.us
Wilson Audio 17
wilsonaudio.com
Wilson Benesch 117
wilson-benesch.com
Wireworld Cable Technology 63
wireworldcable.com
Wynn Audio 5
wynnaudio.com
YG Acoustics 37
yg-acoustics.com

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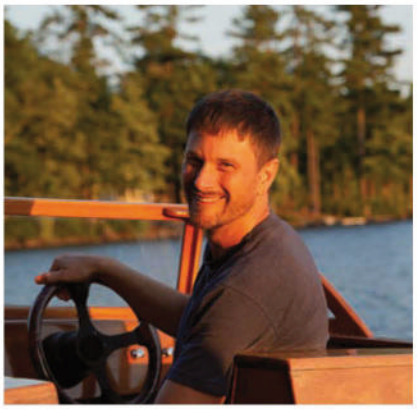

How and when did your interest in high-end audio begin?

One of my earliest memories is looking up at my dad's Altec Lansing 604E horn speakers on the bookshelf in our living room (they looked absolutely enormous to me as a little kid). We always had music playing in our house, usually classical or jazz, from LPs or from the great FM radio stations we could pick up. I would say that was when my interest in music and high-end audio began.

Soon after I learned to play instruments. I started on cello and then the trumpet, which has been my primary instrument to this day. For me playing music, going to concerts, and listening at home are all part of the same passion. I remember thinking in my sophomore year of high school that I had no idea what kind of *real* job I would ever want to do, but I knew I wanted to work in music, and I knew I loved science, stereos, and mechanical things. I had an epiphany at that moment that my ideal job would be to make speakers!

What components made up your first "true" high-end system?

My first high-end system came together when I started my first job out of college. I was very lucky to be hired by Transparent Audio to do product design and sales support. Suddenly, I had access to true high-end components and spent every day listening to a state-of-the-art reference system. The first high-end system I had in my apartment, thanks to Transparent, was a huge pair of Respons Grand speakers from Sweden and an Electrocompaniet AW-200 amplifier from Norway, a Conrad-Johnson PV-12 full-function preamplifier with phonostage, and a Well-Tempered Turntable. In some ways I don't think I will ever surpass the excitement of having that system in my apartment!

When did audio develop from a hobby to a career?

After my speaker-building dream began in high school, I pursued both music and physics in college with the plan to work in audio. I got that first job in 1997 at Transparent Audio and stayed 22 years!

How did your involvement with Rockport begin?

I met Andy Payor in 1997 through my work at Transparent, which is also based in Maine. Andy had worked with Transparent in the 1980s on the Well-Tempered Turntables and various other technical consulting projects. We have been great friends since that time.

In 2019 I purchased Rockport from Andy to pursue my dream of designing and building world-class speakers. Although I now own the company, it is more of a partnership between me and Andy. I handle the business side and he focuses primarily on product development, but we work together on all product design and, most importantly, on the crossover calibration process for each pair of loudspeakers we build. In this way I am learning the craft from one of our industry's greatest designers.

How would you describe the Rockport philosophy or mission?

We combine the most advanced materials and technologies with state-of-the-art audio engineering to create truly believable music systems. I think our greatest skill is knowing how to correlate audio engineering and measurements with the realism of the listening experience.

What interesting fact or aspect about Rockport might surprise audiophiles?

We spend hours burning in and listening to each pair of loudspeakers we produce, because our ears are the best quality control for producing consistently real-sounding systems. Two flat-looking measurements can sound remarkably different. Our individual calibration process ensures that every pair of loudspeakers we build matches our sonic and measured design-reference standard.

What is the last piece of music you listen to before you consider a new loudspeaker ready for production?

There isn't just one, but for me dozens of acoustic voice and unamplified instrumental recordings are the number one sonic references. We develop new technologies and products over the course of many years. We know a product is ready only after it passes the test of time and has proven it is capable of playing all types of music, and most importantly, makes us want to listen to music.

What are the greatest challenges confronting the high-end industry?

There are not enough dealerships where people can go to experience optimized high-end audio systems. You can't hear and experience high-end audio systems through the internet, and there is no one-size-fits-all approach for people, their music, and their home environments. We need dealers to help people design their dream music systems.

Outside of audio, what do you do for fun?

Spending time with my family is number one. After that, I have too many hobbies to list, but among them are running, spending time outdoors, working with my hands, making espresso, enjoying fine beverages, and making and eating great food. tas

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